The Dissertation Committee for Jesse Straus Gainer
certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Voices from Middle School:
Students' Perceptions of Their Educational Experiences

Committee:

Lisa Goldstein, Supervisor

Lisa Cary

Douglas Foley

James Scheurich

Angela Valenzuela

Voices from Middle School:
Students' Perceptions of Their Educational Experiences

by

Jesse Straus Gainer, B.A.; M.A.

Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin
May 2005

Dedication

To Clara, you are my heart and soul.

Acknowledgements

I cannot possibly find words to express all of my gratitude to the many people who have helped me along the way in the process of this dissertation. This is a team effort no doubt. To Ruth and Harold Gainer, thank you for your love and your confidence in me through all of the ups and downs, not only in this project but my whole life. To my daughter Clara, you were great company when I needed it and a tremendous source of inspiration. I am sorry for all the times I asked you to play by yourself so I could write. To Vivian and Ben Gainer, I look up to you guys; I hope you will be proud of this work. To all of my family—I love you very much.

To Lisa Goldstein, there is no way I can adequately acknowledge all that you have done for me. I hope that you know how grateful I am to you. You have been the greatest advisor and mentor a person could possibly ask for. Vygotsky could never have imagined a scaffold that both supported and pushed someone in the way you have done for me. If any words in this dissertation have been strung together in a way that resonate with readers it is because of the many hours you dedicated to helping me.

To Bernice, Thalia, Griselda, DeAndre, Tony, Joe, Ines, Sonia, Jaqueline, Beth, and Fransisco, you are the most wonderful and engaging young people. Thank you for sharing your time and energy with me. I am sure you will do great things in the future. Don't let the bastards get you down.

To Angela Valenzuela, Doug Foley, Lisa Cary, and Jim Scheurich, thank you for your guidance both in my project and by example in your excellent work. I truly appreciate the care and attention you gave my dissertation. I treasure the insight and insightful commentary.

Voices from Middle School:

Students' Perceptions of Their Educational Experiences

Publication No. _____

Jesse Straus Gainer, Ph.D.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2005

Supervisor: Lisa Goldstein

This qualitative research study asked two questions pertaining to students' voices: (a) What do middle school students have to say about their experiences at school, and (b) what are the methodological challenges faced by a researcher when attempting to solicit and represent students' voices? This research attempted to answer these questions by investigating the perceptions of 12 middle school students who were my former elementary students. Data were generated from a semester-long after-school program that included video production and discussion. The students' voices are presented in a multilayered text that recounts the process, the products, and the context of this investigation.

Themes that emerged from the voices of the participants were freedom (and lack of freedom), the importance of addressing issues of race and ethnicity, and outlets. By and large the findings point to a dilemma that school is not

meeting the needs of the participants. This is particularly true for the students of color who participated in this study. Implications include a discussion of critical multicultural education and a need for White teachers to explore culturally relevant pedagogy.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Chapter 1

Introduction

Like I know my life is not interesting and nobody would want to make a movie about my life…it's just like any other—you go to school, you go home, you go to church, and then you come back to school. It's like [a circle].
Sonia

And sometimes teachers do that, like, they just ignore you when they don't know the answer. They don't want to say they don't know the answer so they just ignore you.
Bernice

Most people at this school hate school because you have too many stereotype teachers here.
Tony

I can do a movie about Yu-Gi-Oh and stuff like that because I know more about it. And that's what I do mostly every day.
DeAndre

These are the words of eighth-grade students at Live Oak, an urban middle school located in Central Texas. It is time that we begin to listen to the voices of our students, to take them seriously, to think about how their perspectives can inform our curricular decisions, and to push our thinking in terms of true democracy and equity in education. They deserve to be heard, for they are the primary stakeholders of educational reform. I thought it appropriate to begin with the words of students, not to mask my own authorial presence, or romantically to claim to "give voice" to the voiceless, but in the spirit of listening to students' voices.

This dissertation study asked two questions pertaining to students' voices: (a) What do middle school students have to say about their experiences at school, and (b)

what are the methodological challenges faced by a researcher when attempting to solicit and represent students' voices? The research presented here attempted to answer these questions using a critical constructivist framework to investigate the perceptions of 12 middle school students who were my former elementary students. Their voices are presented in a multilayered and polyvocal text that recounts the process, the products, and the context of this investigation.

For the most part the voices of the middle school students in the dissertation here are not happy ones. The stories they told are primarily about school not meeting their needs. This was particularly true of the students of color. If this dissertation is to have value it must go beyond simply reporting some "bad stories." I believe that education represents a chance to dream. The dream is for a better future for individuals but also for society. Although the stories of my participants are unique to their lives, I hope they will resonate with readers. Many students across this country share similar school experiences. The purpose of listening to the voices of the middle school students in this study is to add to the conversation about teacher education in the pursuit of equitable schooling.

Ironically, or perhaps tellingly, before I can tell the story that I hope will foreground students' voices about schooling, I must begin with one about myself. The following positionality statement will provide insight into the "who" behind these printed words and will shed light on why I designed this study the way I did.

When I was 19 years old, I spent a year as a volunteer in a political refugee camp located in South Texas. It was during the 1980s when many people were fleeing

war and persecution in Central America. I lived and worked with as many as 350 women, men, and children from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. I went to the camp with missionary zeal; I had a romantic notion of helping the "poor refugees" who were fleeing wars sponsored by my government. In my limited context, I was already an outspoken critic of the United States' involvement in Central America. I felt a responsibility to act and to do work that aided the people who were adversely affected by U.S. policy. I was young and energetic, considered myself a hard worker, and was eager to show just how helpful I could be.

Quickly upon arrival I learned that there was neither room nor a need for a "great white hope." As much as I wanted to be a hero, no one was asking. The camp was run by the General Assembly that was comprised of the refugees living in the camp. The General Assembly was governed by an elected group of refugees known as *El Comité* (The Committee). The rules and regulations, as well as the day-to-day affairs of the camp were discussed, set to vote, and determined in the weekly meetings of the General Assembly. This sounds straightforward and democratic; however, as a North American volunteer I was informed that I had neither voice nor vote in the meetings of the General Assembly. The fact that I was there to be a volunteer meant that my "job" was to be supportive (by using my privileges as a citizen with a valid driver's license, for example) and to abide by the rules established by the refugees.

It did not take long for my discomfort to set in. Having no "voice" or "vote" meant that if the General Assembly agreed that we should spend our 4 hours of

obligatory work chopping weeds with a machete, then that was exactly what I had to do. While in the fields, if a lizard happened to run by and six men chased after it trying to beat it to death, I was unsure of my boundaries in terms of voicing objection to the act. If the General Assembly agreed that we should cook everything in lard, then my job, being the only one with a valid driver's license, was to buy the five-gallon buckets. Having recently given up vegetarianism to facilitate living in the camp, I felt that lard was both unhealthy and unnecessary.

Often the decisions in the camp ran contrary to my "better judgment." Many times I felt that I knew better. I was extremely frustrated that I was not being allowed to take control of certain situations and do what I went there to do: help these poor people. The idea of stepping back and not voicing my opinion ran contrary to my fantasy of being a heroic freedom fighter. Although being a follower in this case probably does not sound unreasonable, taking into consideration that I was a middle-class, 19-year-old, White male with 2 years of college under my belt, I was unaccustomed to being asked to take orders from a group of illegal aliens, many of whom were illiterate and had no prior experiences with democracy. In fact, I easily could have justified my input as warranted, because members of the committee often approached me to ask advice on camp matters. Although I was arrogant enough to think, at 19, that I had any ideas on the best way to run a refugee camp, I held my tongue because I was told that it was important for the mission of the camp.

In a discussion with the director, a South American man who had lived in this country for many years, he tried to explain to me the importance of my role as a volunteer. He said,

> What you see at Refugio is in real life directors do not direct. Who directs? The people who in the past were oppressed. And they are not only not oppressed, but those who are supposedly the oppressor are encouraging them not to feel oppressed. Not only not to feel oppressed, but to live a life as free people. You see the director, for instance, not directing and saying publicly, "I am not directing anything." You see the owner of the land going through pains to live a life as if she was not. You see founders trying to express to the refugees that they did only one thing: try to put together ideas that already belong to the people—to them to the refugees. Ideas by Bishop Romero, by Emiliano Zapata, by Faribundo Marti, by Agusto Cesar Sandino. These ideas belong to the refugees; they do not belong to the "founders." What you see at Refugio is a constant attempt of creating structures that belong to the people—that the people themselves create those structures.
>
> It is political. Every North American who comes to the camp abides by a process established by the refugees. There is not a director—there is not a "gringo" solving the problems of the world coming to decide how is it that the camp is going to be run. It is the refugees that are doing that. And the North Americans who come abide by that. And those who do not abide by that are tolerated but not welcome. (Gainer, 1989)

This was a hard pill to swallow. What he was saying went against the reasons I had for going to the refugee camp. I never considered myself an oppressor, and now if I wanted to be welcome in the camp, I could not be a leader. He went on to explain that the refugees were coming from a situation of oppression. Many had never been allowed to make decisions that affected their own lives; they had not experienced agency and power to act as free people. The experience in the camp was an attempt to create a space where they could act as free people. The volunteers who came to the camp were predominantly White and middle class. We had grown up in conditions of privilege, and because of that we had a sense of entitlement based on perceived

"superior" cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1984). There is not a level playing field. Had volunteers shared voice and voted in the running of the camp, it was very likely that they would dominate and assume leadership positions. This almost certainly would have been done with good intentions; nonetheless, it would have undermined the mission of the camp. The mission was to allow a space for refugees to experience freedom. That is why volunteers were asked to be supportive but silent when decisions were being made.

Although terms such as *empowerment* and *colonization* were not used, I believe the principles are very similar to those expressed by Ellsworth (1989) when she wrote of the silencing and marginalization of the "other" in critical pedagogy. Villenas' (1996) account of a university seminar discussion on single population schools expressed the frustration she felt being objectified by the White students' detached arguments. Why couldn't those students be quiet and listen to her perspective without feeling threatened? At the camp, I watched as many well-intentioned volunteers threw up their arms in frustration. I saw many volunteers leave the camp with violently negative reactions. On the converse, I also saw women and men arrive from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and be greeted by the committee of refugees. I watched as they skeptically took in the surroundings, graffiti on the walls openly promoting revolutionary movements in their home countries, a committee of refugees who apparently ran the camp, rules that the residents before them had established and that they were asked to agree upon or change when necessary. I observed as women and men who had remained silent often for weeks

since their arrival slowly began to speak up in the meetings of the General Assembly. Many eventually ran for office as one of the committee members in charge of one of the various domains of the camp.

Although I had once resented the fact that I had been asked to be quiet, it soon became apparent that we were all learning from this experience. We were learning to live life as free people. I hope I have not made this story to be a "victory narrative" or a "hero's tale" about myself or the refugee camp, both of which have so many problems, disfunctionalities, and contradictions that it is beyond the scope of this paper to even touch upon them. However, what I hope to have communicated is the story of an ongoing project, the start of a lesson I am learning about privilege, agency, and humility. I believe it is about more than calling research collaborative; it is about deconstructing "good intentions," reflexivity that calls into question the roots of why we want to do research.

I think this study falls in the critical paradigm. As do critical researchers, I believe that research is inherently political and that researchers should be openly ideological. In this paradigm, the researcher often situates her/himself as an agent of change. Her/his purpose is to uncover oppression and to work with participants to struggle for social justice. However, I fear that this often leads to a patronizing view on the part of the researcher to know more or know better than the oppressed group he/she claims to be assisting. This strikes me as a dangerous formula where the researcher, who more often than not is middle-class and White, is still assuming the role as leader: spokesperson for the oppressed. This is contradictory. This may lead to

some reduction of suffering on some level, much like an act of charity. However, it leaves intact the unequal power dynamic and reproduces a racist and patronizing status quo. How then can a White researcher enter a scene and work with participants of color, who in the United States represent groups marginalized by dominant White culture? Is it possible for a White researcher to study "the other" in a way that is less patronizing and less dominating and strives to open up a platform where participants can voice their perspectives without being thoroughly exploited by those who claim to help them? Feminist researchers are among some of the very few who are asking these difficult questions. Perhaps, for critical research to go from being charity work to revolutionary work, it must have the key ingredient of critical reflexivity.

These are questions I hoped to address in this study. Drawing on the great work of critical educators such as Paulo Freire, I tried to enter a school scene and do a problem-posing project with a group of students. My students, the participants, were asked in a Freirian-type dialogue to observe and reflect on their own school experiences and create generative themes. However, I hope I did not marginalize my participants by relegating them to the colonized status of "other." I hope I have not erased their voices by rewriting them, as bell hooks (as cited in Fine, 1994) put it so perfectly: "No need to hear your voice when I can talk better than you can speak about yourself" (p. 70). Furthermore, I hope I have not "bleached" their voices by saying, "I want to hear your voice only after I ensure that it echoes mine." I simply have tried to open up a space for students' voices to see what happens.

Students' Voices

In the book *Savage Inequalities,* Jonathan Kozol (1991) wrote,

> It occurred to me that we had not been listening much to children in these recent years of "summit conferences" on education, of severe reports and ominous prescriptions. The voices of children, frankly, had been missing from the whole discussion. (p. 5)

Kozol argued that children are perceptive to what is going on around them, and their voices and judgments about the daily realities of life in schools need to be heard. Kozol is not alone in this mandate. Although not a great deal of research has attempted to foreground the voices of students, some researchers advocate listening to students' perceptions (e.g., Cummins, 1986/2001; Fine, 1994; Nieto, 1994; Oldfather, 1995).

In general students are being excluded from the conversations about schooling. These same students have a vested interest in these conversations in which they are the primary stakeholders. The purpose of my research was to make space in the scholarly conversation for them. I used a critical constructivist framework that attempted to foreground students' voices.

I chose to do this by providing a purposeful sample (Patten, 2002) of middle school students the opportunity to express their thoughts through video. Since students are not fluent in the discourses of academia and therefore cannot participate in a scholarly conversation, I designed a project that was not formally written and intended to draw upon a medium that is both familiar and possibly of interest to them. I provided students with the resources and guidance to create movies that depict their

perceptions of life at school. As students worked to collectively construct their depiction of school life, I researched the context, the process, and the product of their endeavor.

My decision to do such a project for my dissertation was a political one. It was about politics and representation. As a White, middle-class man who has spent my entire teaching career in low-income and minority communities I have experienced first hand the mismatch between the cultures of my students and that of myself and of the school. I, as teacher, have played the role of *gatekeeper* or guardian of status quo (Bourdieu, 1977). For me to go into a school setting and observe, analyze, and represent school life for students of color, although it might fit the norms of qualitative research, would be a slap in the face to justice. A slap because such a project would be one more example of the colonizing discourse of "othering" (Fine, 1994). On the other hand, if schools are to become more equitable places, it behooves White teachers and researchers alike to explore culturally relevant pedagogy as well as research methodologies that de-center the researcher/teacher and work to dismantle authoritarian structures. For these reasons I conceptualized a project where I, the researcher, attempted to step back and allow my participants to express themselves to a wider audience.

The fact that a problem exists with the system of educating poor minority children is well documented (e.g., Anyon, 1997; Cummins, 1986/2001; Valencia, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Likewise, it is true that the majority of teachers in public schools are White and middle class (Ladson-Billings, 1994). In the state of Texas

during the 2003–2004 academic year, 71% of teachers were White, while only 38% of the student population was White (Texas Education Agency, 2005). Although the cause of the widespread failure of schools to educate poor students and students of color is complex and confounded with wider scale societal inequity, the sociocultural disconnect felt by many students of color towards schooling institutions plays a role in the alienation that leads to school failure (Nieto, 2000).

With my students I struggled to bridge the school culture with their life experience and interests. At times I felt successful and at others I fell flat on my face. I constantly felt torn between opening up the class with a project-based, student-directed curriculum and with teaching in a traditional manner to ensure that we covered and drilled all of the basics. I believed that my students would benefit from "open-ended," project-based learning that stimulated their interests and creativity. However, I worried that I was doing a disservice to my students if I did not teach them to function in the traditional-style schooling and achieve on measures such as standardized tests. This I found to be a difficult course to navigate. On one hand I fretted over the lack of rigor, real or perceived, when students spent days working on self-initiated projects. On the other hand, when I taught in a top–down fashion, attempting to help students assimilate knowledge of what Delpit (1995) called "codes of power," I felt unsuccessful and worried I was further alienating my students.

As it turns out, I was not alone in this quandary. This dilemma has concerned educators for many years. In the United States, at least since John Dewey began to write about progressive education, there has been hot debate about the best style of

teaching children. Advocates of top–down or traditional teacher-centered education are pitted against advocates of bottom–up or learner-centered curricula. Often those in favor of traditional-style instruction are aligned with right-wing, or conservative, political perspectives, and those who advocate constructivist education are left-wing or liberal progressives. Only recently the political divisions have become complicated with some critique of progressive education coming from the left (Delpit, 1995).

In Texas with high-stakes assessment, the debate becomes particularly divisive. I remember the first day of my first graduate course in the university. The focus of the course was assessment. We started the class by going around the room and introducing ourselves. When it was my turn I proudly stated that I was a bilingual teacher and that all of my students had passed the math and reading portions of the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS, which at the time was the embodiment of the high-stakes test for students in the state). Much to my surprise I found myself shunned by the rest of the class. Students on either side of me shifted their seats to distance themselves as if to make clear that they were not to be mistakenly affiliated with me. I was shocked because I considered myself to be against high-stakes assessment and the deskilling of teachers that follows when a curriculum revolves around teaching to the test. However, as a teacher of children of color I felt a special obligation and responsibility to do what I could to help them pass this test. It is, after all, a measure that holds great weight on how the public will view these students, and it will affect their future lives at school. There has been a great deal of publicity about the achievement gap between White students and students of

color based on the outcomes of this assessment. For these reasons I considered my curricular emphasis on it as a political act and my responsibility. It was my opinion that the high passing rate of my students indicated that I served them well, because at least they were able successfully to play the game of school (Fried, 1995).

As I think back on those years I have mixed feelings about my effectiveness as a teacher. On one hand I was able to consistently produce good test results with my students and I tried to do so while also encouraging open-ended and student-centered learning to flourish. I feel that the balance was very difficult to achieve. Honestly, in my case, I have to admit that the latter was often sacrificed for the former. Like most elementary teachers, once my students went on to middle school I hoped they would continue to be successful students, but I lost contact with them and did not know for sure. I often wondered about my former students. I was curious about how they were faring in their education. Are they assimilating to the culture of school or do they resist and buck up against the system that in many ways is hostile to them and their life experience? Does their school experience now reflect a transmission model or is it student centered? Finally, how do they interpret their experience at school and its relevance to their lives? As I think about this I regret that as their teacher I was often operating on what I perceived to be a political stance but failed to communicate this to them. I feel that I did not take an active enough role in learning from my students. In other words, I had my own agenda, and it was what I felt was best for my students. I could have done much better as an "outsider" to their culture and life experiences

had I explained to them my political motivations for curricular decisions as we entered in dialogue to learn from each other.

In preparation for my dissertation research, I visited the middle school that many of my former students attended. It was my goal to reconnect with my former students and gain insight into their current school experience. The intention was to begin a dialogue that would take the form of a project where we would work as coresearchers investigating their school experience. One day I sat in the cafeteria eating lunch with a small group of former students. Jaqueline, then in seventh grade, asked what I would title my paper. I told her I did not know. She thought for a moment then held up her hands as if framing a marquee and said, "How about, *Live Oak: Is it Ghetto*…or not?" Her words sparked a conversation.

Five students sitting in the cluster participated in the conversation. Four were seventh-grade girls who used to be in my class when in elementary school. The fifth student was a sixth-grade boy who just happened to be sitting nearby. I had been talking to him earlier and introduced him to the group shortly before the conversation began. It is important to note that all five of the students were Latino and native Spanish speakers. Two of the students were in a magnet program at the school and the others were in the comprehensive program. The boy leaned over and asked, "What do you mean ghetto? Do you mean like the East Side?" His tone was a little defensive, like he had had this debate before. He had just finished telling me that he lives in the East Side (a predominantly minority and low-income area) and chose this school for the magnet program. Before Jaqueline could reply, Sonia responded with a long

explanation about the word *ghetto* coming from the time of World War II, "when Germans forced Jews to live in poor, overcrowded conditions." I interjected saying that I did not believe this is what Jaqueline was referring to, and that language changes and it seems "ghetto" in this case was being used in a different way. Jaqueline did not have the words to explain adequately what she meant. She did, however, offer up this analysis: "You know, ghetto, it's like kind of boring but kind of fun."

My interpretation of Jaqueline's words, especially after spending a semester observing in a variety of classrooms and talking to many students about their experiences, was that school has different sides. On one hand, coming to school and doing academics is boring. Many students do not find this connected to their lives and their interests. However, coming to school and socializing with friends is great. That many students feel this way is evident from observing in classes as well as the halls, cafeteria, and courtyard. Thus, Jaqueline's analysis of middle school with her simple explanation of the word *ghetto* not only seems relevant, but also corresponds to research about students' perceptions of school. It reminded me of Jackson's (1968) depiction of "the daily grind" of boredom, waiting, and passive ingestion of information.

This little interchange also showed that children have a great deal to say about their experiences in school. The students have an emic perspective; in other words, they can speak to issues of schooling from an insider's point of view. Given the opportunity, they are not only knowledgeable and analytic, but also eager to share

their insights and debate them amongst themselves. However, how they want to frame themselves for outsiders may be more complex than simply a descriptive narrative. Certainly it would be difficult, if not impossible, for an outsider like myself to analyze and depict their perspectives merely through observation and interviews. Therefore, I conceptualized a project that attempted to be polyvocal, foregrounding not only my interpretations but also the voices of my middle school participants. I hope this research adds to conversations around students' voices, culturally relevant pedagogy, and equity in education.

It seems to me that the most political and revolutionary work may be work that does not appear to be "political" or "revolutionary." Rather than putting all of our attention on a product that looks and feels like it is critical, maybe we need to make sure we concentrate on the process and take measures to strive to "live" a life as critical researchers. Before giving an overview of the dissertation I will conclude with the words of my friend and mentor, the director of the refugee camp where I worked as a teenager. Although he was talking about the philosophy of the camp, I believe his words have great value for teachers and researchers who wish to struggle for educational equity based on a love of their students rather than a hatred for the system. It is my hope that his words will resonate through the pages that follow.

> Refugio is a political and revolutionary place. It is pacifist and nonviolent. The concept of revolution however, is a very different concept of revolution. The concept of revolution of Refugio del Rio Grande owes little to the European concept of revolution. While the European concept of revolution begins with the hatred we have for the oppressor, the Latin American concept of revolution comes out of the love we have for the oppressed. Refugio is a revolutionary place indeed. It is a revolutionary idea. It takes some of the

> ideas of the past, of the Latin American culture. It takes the need for change, the struggle for freedom, the incredible quest for peace and social justice of the Latin American people, and it brings those ideas smack into the United States. (Gainer, 1989)

Dissertation Outline

My dissertation investigates the ways middle school students perceive their experiences at school. Chapter 1 introduces my research questions: What do middle school students have to say about their experiences at school? What are the methodological challenges faced by a researcher when attempting to solicit and represent students' voices? A rationale for the study is included in this chapter, highlighting the importance of this topic and the need for this line of inquiry. In addition, chapter 1 includes my statement of positionality that explains some of the motivation for my focus on students' voices and the way in which I have approached the investigation.

Chapter 2 addresses the relevant literature in the area of students' voices, constructivist education and research, and media literacy in order to specify the conceptual framework for the study. The literature review seeks to highlight the lack of attention paid to students' voices, both in research and in schooling, and the value of directing attention to this area. Within this chapter, key concepts of "othering," politics of the mundane, reflexivity, and reciprocity are explored to add to the critical constructivist framework for my investigation of students' voices.

Chapter 3 details the methodology that guided this investigation. Data gathering centered on an after-school media literacy program in a middle school over a period of 12 weeks. The data sources included films made by the middle school participants, conversations with the participants about their films, other conversations in the context of the study, and my own observations recorded as field notes and analytic journaling. Data analysis focused on open coding of data in an effort to identify emergent themes with respect to the ways middle school students perceive their experiences at school. Chapter 3 also includes an introduction to each of the 12 middle school students involved in this study, demographic information on the middle school the participants attended, and a statement about the importance of trustworthiness in this research.

Chapter 4 is a mini-chapter that summarizes each of the student-made films that were produced in the context of the after-school program. Four films are described: *Groups in our School, A Day at School, Yu-Gi-Oh News Day,* and *Does Freedom Exist?* The purpose of this chapter is to give a brief overview of each film that will provide background needed to understand the following data chapters. A DVD accompanies this dissertation that contains each of these films.

Chapters 5, 6, and 7 address the themes that emerged from the voices of the participants. In each chapter data are presented, analyzed, and interpreted related to the specified themes. Chapter 5 focuses on students' perceptions of freedom. The construct is divided into pedagogical freedom and societal freedom. Chapter 6 looks at the participants' treatment of race and ethnicity connected to society and

experiences in schooling. Chapter 7 highlights outlets identified by participants that provide them with social, emotional, and intellectual fulfillment in their lives. The various outlets include school-based outlets, community-based outlets, and personal outlets.

Chapter 8 responds to the second research question by examining the challenges faced in research that attempts to identify and portray students' voices. This chapter problematizes the methodology used in this study to solicit and represent students' voices. The methodological concerns highlighted in this chapter include issues relating to collaborative research, using a critical constructivist framework, and using video data.

Chapter 9 responds to the original research questions by examining the implications of students' voices research. In this chapter, I return to the themes brought forward by the participants of this study with an eye toward understanding how curriculum can be structured to better meet the needs of all young people. I use Sonia Nieto's (2000) tenets for critical multicultural education as a starting point for analyzing implications for teachers. Based on my research findings, I then propose some additional implications specifically geared for White teachers working in multiracial contexts. Suggestions with respect to future research are discussed. I conclude with reflections on social justice and education.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In this chapter I review relevant literature pertaining to a research framework that is based on foregrounding students' voices. I start by discussing the need for research that investigates this area of inquiry. Next, I describe critical constructivist literature that relates to issues of students' voices. Since film is the medium I used with my participants, there is treatment of literature on media literacy that supports the use of film in such research. Finally, I address some problematic issues that can surface in qualitative research that purports to foreground and represent voices of marginalized peoples.

Why Should We Care About Student Voices?

In this work I strive to center the voices, perspectives, disappointments, and hopes of young urban adolescents of the poor and working classes. My work investigates how they perceive their school experiences and spin images of their personal and collective futures. This group is often the focus of academic research, media reports, and educational reforms. However, they are a relatively unheard-from group in our American democracy (Nieto, 1994).

Frequently, the media and scientific research negatively depict the urban poor as the causes of national problems. They are blamed for increases in violence, the burden of welfare expenditures, and the decline of public education. In relation to

schooling, the reporting on urban students traditionally has been characterized by viewing them as damaged, lacking the skills necessary for academic success. Often the culture and home language of the students is seen as the cause of the children's difficulties in school, thus blaming the victim for failures of the school system. This deficit-oriented portrayal is both influenced by and promulgates hegemonic stereotypes of poor urban students as pathological underachievers in need of repair.

The repair offered by policymakers is scientific management: a heavy dose of direct instruction coupled with standardized assessment. Instruction in this model of reform takes the form of transmission of skills and facts. Paulo Freire (1970) called this "banking education." The idea is that tests can pinpoint the exact objectives an individual needs, and the teacher can place the information into the children's heads as if depositing money in the bank. Unfortunately, in real life children's heads are not like piggy banks, and there is no slot on top for teachers to insert knowledge and skills. Other researchers have critiqued this top–down model of instruction. This model incorporates virtually the same assumptions about teaching and learning that Jackson (1986) strongly critiqued and termed "mimetic teaching." Cummins (1986/2001) also has been critical of this transmission model of instruction that fosters a "learned helplessness." Many learning theorists (Dewey, 1938; Piaget, 1951; Vygotsky, 1978) have condemned this as unconnected and alienating to the lives of the students.

It seems that this top–down style of curriculum closely parallels the top–down epistemology of empirical research that fuels the drive for such measures. Thus,

deficit thinking and hegemony are reproduced in social science research as well as in the school curriculum. With the rise of statewide high-stakes testing and movements to standardize curriculum, teacher-centered transmission models of education prevail. Rote learning where teachers lecture and textbooks are the primary teaching materials is emphasized, and models of instruction that promote creativity, critical thinking, and student collaboration are sacrificed. This is especially true in schools that serve poor children and students of color (Cummins, 1986/2001; McNeil, 2000).

Martin Haberman (1991) is critical of "the pedagogy of poverty," a teaching style that consists of teachers giving instructions, asking questions, making assignments, and monitoring seat work and behavior. The commonly held view is that this style of teaching is necessary for students to master the "basics" before they can move to higher level tasks involving critical thinking. Haberman claimed this is not good teaching and does not work. Instead, he asserted teachers should seek to actively involve students in real-life situations that actively engage them and allow them to reflect on their lives.

When given the opportunity, students have much to say back to the policymakers, educators, and others in this country. However, their input is missing. It is valuable and necessary if we wish to create a truly democratic society that works to create high-quality education for all children. As a teacher I was guilty of failing to take into consideration my students' perspectives on schooling; as a researcher I have initiated a dialogue with students in order to add to efforts that place value on the self-

determination of students. I believe this is necessary and could help to inform teachers, particularly White teachers working with diverse students.

An Illustrative Example

The following is an excerpt from data I collected while conducting a pilot study at Live Oak Middle School, the site of my dissertation research. I include this story because it is an example of both the alienating aspects of traditional curriculum and pedagogy and a glimmer of light demonstrating the potential when students are asked to discuss an issue that is relevant to their lives.

One morning in early fall I noticed the school seemed unusually quiet when I arrived. On my way to the office I noticed a large group of students in an assembly in the cafeteria. As I headed across the courtyard I approached a White teacher accompanied by a Latina student.

"Excuse me, can you tell me what's going on in the cafeteria?" I inquired.

"Oh, today is diversity training," replied the teacher in an exasperated voice. "They didn't even tell the teachers about it until this morning," she said, rolling her eyes, and added, "Typical."

"I would like to see that. It sounds neat." I tried to circumvent the swipe at the administration and go back to the topic of the assembly.

"She went this morning." She pointed to the silent girl by her side. "When I asked her about what she learned, she didn't even know what it was about." The

teacher talked about the child as if she were not present. The child just stood there looking at me without saying a word.

"Do you think it would be all right if I went in and listened?" I asked, eager to get out of this uncomfortable interaction.

"Maybe you won't be welcome in there since you are White," replied the teacher in a cynical tone that was meant to be humorous.

"Actually, I was asking because I don't have a visitor's badge on and I don't want to get in trouble."

"You're fine. People have seen you around, nobody will bother you."

The teacher was obviously being sarcastic, taking a jab at some real or imagined source that makes her uncomfortable. It seemed she felt unwelcome in the presence of a conversation on diversity. As if she has no place in a conversation about race or ethnicity because she is White (Tatum, 1997). Through the entire interaction the child stood in silence. Certainly taking in the words in some fashion, she must have had an interpretation of this scene. However, the teacher controlled the conversation and did not solicit an opinion. Perhaps for other reasons, I also did not ask her for feedback—feedback that certainly would have been important, since the presentation in the cafeteria was for her, and we (the teacher and myself) are supposedly interested in the education of children. According to the teacher, the student already had attended the assembly and learned nothing from it. I do not believe that. The teacher did not mask her negative feelings about the topic of the assembly; if she asked the student to tell her about it, it was certainly in a

condescending tone that warranted no response other than a shrug of the shoulders. I imagine that the student stayed quiet due to alienation. I believe she feels alienation from an entire system that does not respect her experience or perspective.

This is an example of a teacher who talks down to a student and even talks for her. Perhaps this student senses the weight of a system that makes her feel like a failure because she does not have enough individual merit to "make it" in society. Maybe she feels conflicted because of mixed messages heard within a society and school that seem to ensure her failure while preaching democratic ideals. Maybe she is quiet in response to a teacher who is supposed to be respected and who acts threatened when issues of importance to the life of this child are brought into the school? It could be that this child chooses not to speak because she realizes that this teacher she is supposed to look to for help is apparently a racist. Or worse, what if she has begun to internalize the racism of this teacher and of a system that systematically destroys her spirit and that of her friends and family? I will never know for sure why this child did not object during this brief conversation. However, after reflecting on it, and on her silence, I am convinced of the importance of soliciting students' perceptions of schooling.

Anxious to know what was so threatening to this teacher, I entered the crowded cafeteria. An African American professor from a local university, wearing a dashiki, was at the front of the room with a microphone. She had a Powerpoint presentation broadcast on a small screen behind her. Students filled the cafeteria tables, and the professor spoke over the low rumble of children chatting and

laughing. It was apparent that many students were paying attention, because the professor often solicited choral response and students from around the room would answer. Also, when she said something provocative she got a rise out of the majority of the audience. Teachers were strategically positioned around the room and removed students periodically if they felt they were being overly disruptive. The speaker addressed various themes. She spoke of historical injustice and inequality, the contradiction of a celebration of Columbus discovering America when in fact the Native Americans discovered Columbus, and finally she made some references to the importance of doing homework and performing well in school.

Towards the end of the interactive presentation a slide projected on the screen read, "ABT." From her position in the front of the room the professor stated, "This means, Ain't Been Taught. Many times we do not know information because we haven't been taught about it." She gave many examples of contributions of people from different ethnic and racial groups who have influenced our lives.

"We credit Thomas Edison with the invention of the light bulb, but we often are not taught that he could not keep the bulb on without the carbon filter," said the professor. The man who invented the carbon filter that keeps a light bulb on was African American. As she spoke, revealing hidden truths about our history, you could see light bulbs turning on above the heads of dark-haired children all around the cafeteria. Edison, it turns out, had a Hispanic mother. The professor went on to give a long list of contributions to our society, and with each identified contribution she divulged the ethnicity of the people responsible for it. She pointed out that an African

American man invented the traffic light. The first open heart surgery, the polio vaccine, and space travel were made possible through collaborations of people from diverse groups.

"We live in a nation that does not always tell the whole story, and because you are the future leaders I want you to know the whole story," she informed her teenage audience. To finish the presentation she instructed the young people to repeat after her in a call-and-response style. The room boomed with the voices of children chorally chanting, "I will never give up," "My language is my culture, it nurtures me, it sustains me, there is no shame in being who I am," and "I have two languages, my Spanish and my English."

"And now for a little Ebonics." The professor concluded the presentation by leading a chant, "I is free. I be free."

After the assembly I followed Sonia, a seventh grader, to her magnet Language Arts class. The prompt on the overhead read, "What was your impression of the diversity speech? What did you get from it? How does diversity relate to our class and curriculum?"

"What do you mean by diversity?" asked an African American girl named Vanessa. Interestingly the class was composed of around 25 students who were almost evenly distributed between Latino, African American, and Anglo.

"For example, in this class we have been trying to look at both sides of the story when we look at the history of the conquest of Mexico," Mr. Martinez explained. "Or think about our school; Live Oak has some of the best students from

this entire school district. The students here come from all over the city," he continued.

"Do you mean the magnet program?" Vanessa inquired.

"Yes, but also in general we have a diverse student body. Many students are from this neighborhood," he replied.

Vanessa touched on an interesting chord with her question. She seemed to be aware that diversity could mean very different things depending on the track within the school from which it is viewed. The teacher wanted to present the school as a unified entity, when in fact the comprehensive program is predominantly students of color and is considerably less rigorous academically.

"It was boring," Rachel, a White girl, stated in reference to the diversity program.

"What do you mean?" questioned the teacher.

"I couldn't see and I couldn't hear," continued Rachel.

A White boy concurred, "I thought it was a waste of time. It was mostly about doing your homework." Although they did not come across quite as threatened as the White teacher I encountered in the hall, these students seemed to share her view of the presentation as a waste of school time.

An African American girl disagreed, "I thought it helped because I didn't know that a Black man helped to invent the light bulb." Another African American girl continued the thought, "I learned that the mistakes our parents made—we don't have to do it. We can fill in the holes that our parents didn't." These students not only

demonstrated that they were paying attention in the assembly, but also extended its message to examine personal experiences and to make interpretations.

A White boy raised his hand. "It was a waste of time because most of the time it was stuff we had already heard a million times and it was like one of Mr C's [the principal] subliminal messages—do your homework." Interestingly, this child brushed aside the bulk of the presentation, which dealt with issues of racial inequality, with a comment about having heard it many times before. He did focus, however, on a minor point made by the speaker about doing homework. This point seemed to him like the empty propaganda of a school administrator. Contrary to what this boy heard, in the context of the presentation doing homework was clearly connected to social responsibility and using education as an avenue for creating a more just society.

"NO, you've heard it," an African American boy in obvious frustration yelled out in response to the last remark. He cut himself off knowing he was not allowed to call out in class. It must have seemed unbelievable to this child that the speech that apparently made a powerful impression on him, and perhaps validated a frustration he had felt with schooling, did not seem to resonate at all for his White classmate.

Although many students were eager to speak, they did not directly address each other with their comments. Instead, they raised their hands and articulated seemingly isolated impressions. In an apparent attempt to defuse a potentially tense situation, Charlie, a White boy, questioned the speaker's use of language. He said,

"Why didn't she just say White, Black, and Mexican?" This drew laughter from many in the class. However, it did provoke some serious discussion.

"Some people are offended by those terms…that is why you need to use the terms she used," an African American girl responded.

"She explained why she used those terms—" an African American boy (the same child who yelled "NO" earlier) called out. Again, he cut himself off because he had not raised his hand.

A Latino boy sitting in the front of the room picked up the thread of the conversation, "Like I am not Mexican, and I don't like when people say I am Mexican, because it is a different culture. I am not from Mexico."

The White boy looked at him and replied, "But you are Mexican. I wouldn't mind if they called me White, because I am White."

"You really shouldn't care what other people call you. It doesn't really matter," continued another White boy addressing the entire class.

At this an African American girl yelled across the room angrily pointing her finger at him, "You can only say that because you are White."

Hands were waving in the air, signaling that many children had more they wished to add to the conversation. The class seemed to be divided by racial lines. Each White student who spoke talked about the program being a waste of time, only focusing on doing homework and on proper labels to use when referring to people of different ethnicities. The African American and Latino students found many specific points in the presentation that they found interesting and helpful. The White kids did

not hear what the children of color were saying. They did not seem to understand that what they were doing was normalizing Whiteness and viewing the situation through a shroud of privilege (Frankenberg, 1993). The White students comfortably have made their way through school in a society that is consumed with the myth of individual meritocracy (Freire, 1970). Although they have heard of historical instances of racial discrimination, they have been taught that in this country anyone who works hard can succeed. On the other hand, the students of color seem aware that meritocracy is a myth. They have lived the experience of being racialized in and outside of school (Scheurich, 2002). Although they have heard similar messages of meritocracy as the White students, the students of color have experienced and internalized them in a different way.

Mr. Martinez appeared uncomfortable with the situation and nervous about losing control and having the conversation spiral into an argument or even a brawl. "We are going to have to stop right here, because some people can't follow the rules by listening quietly and raising your hands to speak," he told the class. "I have a lot of thoughts on this. If you would like to talk to me individually about it, I would be glad to. I want you to reflect on this and be open minded on topics that are controversial. We are not going to spend any more class time on this because we have to move on."

Ironically, the topic that they needed to move on to was the Conquest. In this class the students had been reading about the Spanish colonization of Mexico. Rather than a "traditional" text, the teacher had chosen various books that highlight the

perspectives of the Native Americans. The students in the class, diverse in ethnicity and socioeconomic status, seemed willing and able to agree about past transgressions of Spaniards. Why, then, was there such division when discussing the topic of diversity and discrimination in present society?

Here we have a teacher who diverged from his planned lesson to address an important topic from an assembly. For a brief time in his classroom students were engaged in serious discussion. For these few minutes the mood in the class took on what Weis and Fine (2001) called a "third space" or a "safe space." Weis and Fine used these terms to describe what can happen when teachers use "disruptive pedagogies" to "challenge the reproductive instincts of public education" (p. 499). The teacher intentionally engages students in dialogue on topics that are important and relevant to their lives. This serves to counter hegemony because the teacher seeks to create a space in which children can challenge the exclusionary practices of society, including the public institutions such as schools, that create inequalities by class, race, and gender.

The topic in this example, diversity, was a sensitive one in this racially and ethnically mixed class; thus, the teacher appeared nervous about the uncertainty of where the conversation would lead. As evidenced in this example, students are eager and able to discuss issues that they see as relevant to their lives. Although the solicitation of students' voices in this case was constructivist in nature, the style of dialogue—directed at the teacher—is not optimal for constructivist class discussion. Perhaps this can be attributed partly to the sensitivity of the subject; however, I

believe it also reflects the typical classroom discourse in which all student comments are directed at the teacher as "the expert." It seems that these students, like most students across the country, are unaccustomed to engaging in real discussion, even less so with a sensitive topic. In fact, on an earlier occasion this teacher explained to me that he did not allow the students to engage in small group work. He explained to me that if he did so, he would not be able to monitor them and fistfights would break out. For this reason they always conduct class as a whole-group activity.

The teacher in this example initiated a Freirian-type dialogue. Ultimately, however, the deep-seated "anti-dialogic" nature of traditional schooling took hold and thwarted the attempt. In this case the discussion got a little too heated for the comfort of the teacher, and he abruptly transitioned the class back to the preplanned lesson, leaving many student hands waving in the air. Fear of losing control, demonstrated in this example by the teacher, leads to teacher-centered models of instruction (hooks, 1994). Teacher-centered instruction is a common characteristic of schooling, especially for students in low-income areas (Anyon, 1997). The planned lesson, ironically, was about colonization, a topic that easily ties into the diversity discussion. Perhaps this was another missed opportunity, but at least the teacher allowed the conversation to take place for a short time.

Another important point to consider is that although the style was constructivist, it was not void of adult direction. The impetus for the discussion was based on content delivered in the assembly. The content connected children's personal experiences to broader structural and historic inequalities in society. The

teacher guided the students with the question posed in the beginning of class. This scenario is at the heart of critical constructivist pedagogy and has implications for my research design. Although in some ways it was a missed opportunity because the discussion was abruptly ended, the brief interaction provided the students an unusual and meaningful space in the classroom as they expressed their opinions and understandings of complex social issues.

Feminist and qualitative researchers have argued that social science investigators should work to uncover the silences in narratives and to give voice to those who historically have been denied their speech through the denial of their experiences (Bertram, 2000). The perceptions of adolescents are rarely heard in regard to problems with schooling and issues of school reform (Corbett & Wilson, 1995). In fact, very little research has been done in this area. The perspectives of urban, poor, and minority adolescents are even less frequently addressed in reform literature. Weis and Fine (2000) asserted, "Public policies speak largely from a privileged standpoint as if race and gender neutral" (p. 25). This type of policy in the realm of education ignores the needs of poor urban students. Considering that these are the students for whom most reform is targeted, and these are the students who by and large still are being failed by the school system, it is reasonable to state that soliciting their perceptions of their school experiences would be worthwhile and relevant.

Lincoln (1995) gave two main reasons why it is important to listen to students' voices. First, she pointed out that theorists such as Piaget have shown that

healthy humans are active participants in learning about, and constructing views of, the social world around them. She wrote,

> Since schooling is one of the most powerful shapers of both learning and acquiring world-view, it makes sense to attend to ways in which children actively shape their contexts and begin to model their worlds and the way in which we, in turn, shape the possibilities available for learners. (p. 89)

Therefore, it is vital to understand how students are interpreting their experiences at school in order to restructure curriculum to better meet their needs.

Second, Lincoln (1995) pointed to political reasons for soliciting student voices. The purpose of schools historically has been to educate citizens for participation in the democratic process. However, research has shown that this has not always been the actual outcome. Instead, we have "retrofitted children to the presumed roles they would occupy as adults" (Lincoln, p. 89). Schools assign children to social statuses that relate to race, economic status, or gender, not to "intelligence." Supporting a truly democratic society requires teaching active participation and critical thinking skills far beyond what most students experience in public schools. If we expect schools to produce citizens who are able to exercise voice in a democracy, they have to be able to evaluate and synthesize information about important social issues.

Like Lincoln, Penny Oldfather (1995) has written of the need for research on students' perspectives on schooling. According to Oldfather, student voices are important in research, especially as we move toward a view of learning as a process of social construction and dismantle notions of teaching as transmission. She wrote,

"In the midst of expanding the boundaries of knowledge authority and scholarly research, we are generally leaving out the primary stakeholders of education: students" (p. 131). Oldfather argued that students should act as research partners when examining questions of learning:

> Students are the experts on their own perceptions and experiences as learners. They are the "only authentic chroniclers of their own experience" (Delpit, 1988, p. 297). Yet adults (both teachers and researchers) more often than not leave students out of the dialogue about educational concerns and underestimate the potential that students have in contributing to our understandings. (p. 131)

Educators and educational researchers should care about what students have to say. After all, isn't it the purpose of schooling to foster the intellectual growth of our young people? If so, we have much to gain from understanding how they interpret their experiences at school.

The story of the diversity training highlights the desire and the ability of students to articulate their perceptions when they are not being silenced and controlled by authoritative adults. There is another important point to be gleaned from this story. It is found in the message of the professor who spoke about issues of diversity. "Ain't been taught" was the way she described the whitewashing of history that systematically has excluded stories of the great achievements of people of color and other socially marginalized peoples.

Children are a marginalized group in our society, and their voices are seldom heard. "Ain't been heard" could be the mantra here. This is not acceptable, especially in matters of schooling that directly affect them and of which they have such intimate

knowledge. It is time we open space for students to participate in discussions about schooling.

How Do We Get at Students' Voices?

This section discusses the work of some theorists who have provided frameworks for working with disenfranchised groups of people. These theorists have used critical constructivist pedagogy to put students in the center of curricular decisions. I believe that critical constructivist pedagogy has a great deal to offer educational researchers who intend to solicit student perspectives.

Lincoln (1995) stated that teachers/researchers must be willing to hear and honor student voices and must know how to elicit student voices. To do this research means to diverge from standard methods of conventional science that created the silencing conditions in the first place. Therefore, researchers must use alternative methods. "That is, it will be grounded not in the experiences of White adults but rather in the pluralistic perspectives of many kinds, colors, socioeconomic classes, and genders of children" (p. 91). Such searches for students' voices must be contextualized in history; social and economic conditions; and the structural constructs of racism, classism, and sexism.

For Lincoln (1985), the answer is naturalistic inquiry, which is based in constructivism and informed by critical theory. She explained, "Constructivism seeks no single, 'true,' social reality, but rather focuses on the meaning-making activities of individuals and groups who must make sense of the contexts in which they find

themselves" (p. 92). It is not enough to simply ask students to tell about their experiences; students need guidance from teachers/researchers to examine broader context of their personal experiences. Therefore, Lincoln has advocated incorporating elements of critical theory:

> The major contribution of critical theory to this search for student voices is the focus on helping students examine the patterns in their lives in such a way as to discern the nearly-hidden structures that shape their own and others' lives. Within such a framework, students can be prompted to articulate for themselves the hidden curriculum and the near-invisible structures of racism, classism, and sexism that act to undermine their sense of self-worth and esteem. They can be helped to understand the intuited effects of social structures on their lives, and indeed, can be helped to understand the effects of other cultural icons—television, film, print media, dress, and even the functions of language—to sort and separate. (p. 92)

She has advocated examining with students elements of culture that are familiar and important to them. Topics such as music, games, dress, and dances are examples of avenues to student meaning making. Lincoln stated that researchers should use the "accouterments of student life as windows on student worlds" (p. 92).

Sonia Nieto (1994) has maintained that in order to reflect critically on issues of school reform, students' perspectives need to be included. Nieto pointed out that students' views are for the most part missing from discussions about school failure and success. In a study using interviews of 10 young people from a wide variety of ethnic, racial, linguistic and social-class backgrounds, she developed case studies depicting their perspectives about their school experiences. Nieto stated that it is important to solicit the perspectives from the very group educational strategies most affect.

The participants in Nieto's (1994) study were interviewed to find out what it meant to be from their particular background, how this influenced their school experience, and what they would change about their school experience if they could. Nieto reported being surprised by the depth of awareness and the analysis that the students were able to share. Nieto concluded that teachers and schools need to consider some crucial questions when reflecting on what they can learn from their students. She suggested the following questions:

- How do students feel about the curriculum they must learn?
- What do they think about the pedagogical strategies their teachers use?
- Is student involvement a meaningful issue for them?
- Are their own identities important considerations in how they view school?
- What about tracking and testing and disciplinary policies? (Nieto, 1994, p. 398)

By allowing students to voice their opinions and speak of their personal experiences and emic knowledge of these issues, we (researchers, teachers, school systems) gain insight into how students are socially constructing knowledge and can further understanding on how to make school learning more relevant for those who attend our schools. The students in Nieto's (1994) study pointed to issues of curriculum, pedagogy, and tracking. "Students are asking us to look critically not only at structural conditions, but also at individual attitudes and behaviors" (p. 424). Although the voices in the article are of individual students, they speak to issues that could lead to transformations of entire schools.

Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) advocated a critical multiculturalism characterized by a partnership model; although the focus is on teachers, I believe it

also can help inform research relationships. In this model power is shared by challenging the professional mystique "that concentrates power in the hands of experts" (p. 114). Rather than being a one-sided relationship in which the teacher has all of the power, this model advocates collaborative relationships in which teachers and students coconstruct curriculum and instruction. This affirms students' voices and allows them to help shape the context, style, and language of the classroom. If this type of classroom relationship were achieved, it would create a dynamic that resists hegemony of top–down traditional models of instruction and would validate the knowledge of all students.

Educators who successfully teach children from oppressed communities actively affirm the cultures of the children (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Even though most teachers have the best intentions, this is difficult to achieve across difference. Teachers are used to knowing more than our students and can find it threatening to think students might know more than they do (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999).

Although not specifically about student perspectives, Cummins (1986/2001) provided a framework for empowering minority students that highlights active involvement of students. This framework parallels the work of Nieto and others who have advocated a dialogic approach to curriculum. Cummins claimed, "We need to challenge the exclusion of human relationships from our understanding of what constitutes effective education" (p. 650). A major reason reform efforts fail to include potentially empowering elements is policymakers create them. These policymakers are tied to the status quo. Anything that would truly bestow power and status on

minority groups would breach the established pattern of dominant–dominated group relations.

Cummins (1986/2001) stated that democracy has contradictions between the rhetoric of equality and the reality of domination. This contradiction is exemplified in the myth of meritocracy. He wrote,

> Equality of opportunity is believed to be a given, it is assumed that individuals are responsible for their own failure and are, therefore, made to feel that they have failed because of their won inferiority, despite the best efforts of dominant-group institutions and individuals to help them. (p. 662)

Instead, policymakers are looking for instructional techniques that can be scripted and controlled scientifically. "In social conditions of unequal power relations between groups, classroom interactions are never neutral with respect to the messages communicated to students about their language, culture, intellect, and imagination" (pp. 650-651). Top–down reform such as that offered by policymakers serves to further disable minority students.

Serious efforts at reform must try to reverse the devaluation of identity that minority students historically have experienced and the societal power structure that perpetuates this pattern. Like Nieto, Cummins (1986/2001) assigned a great deal of agency to the teacher. He stated that the teacher, and schools, can empower or disempower minority students. This is done depending on how much the teacher is able or willing to go up against societal structures of inequality. This includes embracing and valuing the cultures that children bring to school. "Curriculum and instruction focused on empowerment, understood as the collaborative creation of

power, start by acknowledging the cultural, linguistic, imaginative, and intellectual resources that children bring to school" (Cummins, p. 653). To do this requires tapping into funds of knowledge in the children's communities (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). Teachers must work to counter curriculum that "constructs the child as a cultural, linguistic, intellectual, and imaginative *tabula rasa*" (Cummins, p. 654).

The challenge, according to Cummins (1986/2001), is for educators to work to reverse the pattern of widespread minority group educational failure. This is both personal by changing the structure of the classroom and political by advocating to colleagues and decision makers. The goal is to restructure schools to transform society by empowering minority students rather than to reflect society by disabling them.

The work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire exemplifies critical constructivist theory in practice. Steinberg and Kincheloe (1998) wrote,

> Freire's lessons in research were subversive: his invitation to students to take part in the conceptualization, criticism, and reconceptualization of research can be correctly construed as a direct challenge to the modernist cult of the expert. (p. 16)

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a thorough account of all of Freire's work. However, I would like to outline briefly some points taken from Freire's work that I have drawn upon, because I feel they are important and helped guide my theoretical framework and methodology.

Freire worked with adult *campesinos* to create a dialogical method of teaching that centered their experiences as they began to critically analyze their situation in the world. He started with the stance that no education is neutral and that traditional education reproduces social inequalities. The elite in society are those who are in control of the systems of knowledge and thus have the privilege to determine what counts as knowledge and truth. The dominant values of society are transmitted in a top–down fashion. Myths of the elite are propagated and dispersed through media and all facets of society.

Schools are an arm of the oppressive elite. They serve to reproduce structures of domination. Freire (1970) called this style of education the banking model. In this model students do not become actively engaged; instead, they are expected to be passive listeners. Children who are not from the dominant or elite class are alienated and are taught that they are ignorant. Schooling is very disconnected from the lives and needs of people in marginalized social classes. Through the process of schooling and other social institutions the poor are dehumanized. This dehumanization is a result of being treated as objects rather than subjects. The oppressed, according to Freire, are alienated from themselves. They doubt themselves and act passive; thus, they are willing to turn over "expert" status to others. It happens because oppressors are in control of knowledge and its production. Through schooling the oppressed are dehumanized and internalize the oppression. They "call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen" (Freire, p. 63).

The elite, according to Freire (1970),

> Use the banking concept of education in conjunction with a paternalistic social action apparatus, within which the oppressed receive the euphemistic title of "welfare recipients." They are treated as individual cases, as marginal persons who deviate from the general configuration of a "good, organized, and just" society. The oppressed are regarded as the pathology of the healthy society, which must therefore adjust these "incompetent and lazy" folk to its own patterns by changing their mentality. (p. 74)

Freire stated that the oppressors use "false generosity" to make it seem as if they are helping the oppressed. In reality, these selective "good deeds" that seem to soften their power, acts of charity, only serve to reinforce status quo. False generosity keeps the oppressed dependent and in debt to the oppressors and allows the oppressors to feel they are being helpful to the oppressed. This is paternalism, and Freire considered such acts of welfare to be instruments of alienation: "They act as an anesthetic, distracting the oppressed from the true causes of their problems and from the concrete solution of these problems" (p. 152).

Tied to the myth of the generosity of the oppressors is the myth of individual meritocracy: Anybody who works hard can succeed. This myth implies that all people in society are equal and have an equal opportunity to ascend up the social ladder. This myth causes the oppressed to blame themselves for their situation in life and serves to keep the oppressed from questioning the root cause of their oppressive condition. Privilege of the elite, the oppressors, is not seen by the oppressors themselves; they believe they have acquired more through their own effort and courage to take risks. Both of these myths, according to Freire (1970), are fueled by the egoism of the oppressor class.

Freire (1970) called the domination of the elite over the oppressed "cultural invasion." In cultural invasion the dominant class imposes its worldview upon the oppressed, thus inhibiting their creativity and their expression. Freire argued that the oppressed internalize the myths of the dominant class and become convinced of their intrinsic inferiority. This leads the oppressed to try to mimic the invaders. Basically brainwashed to believe they have nothing valuable to offer, the oppressed become caught in a "culture of silence." They can feel their discomfort, yet are unable to name the source of oppression.

Freire (1970) offered an alternative to the oppressive, anti-dialogic education. This is the pedagogy of the oppressed, or libratory education. Most important in this type of education is the respect and value of the input and culture of the oppressed. Based on the work of Che Guevara and Martin Buber, Freire styled a pedagogy that is humble and dialogic. It is humble in that the teachers become students who learn from/with their students, a practice Freire called "true generosity." This can only be achieved through dialogue. The crux of such pedagogy lies in praxis, the intersection of theory and practice. Teachers start by guiding students to investigate their world and begin to analyze and name the oppression inherent in it. Students act as "co-investigators," developing generative themes. These themes are grounded in the life experience of the students. According to Freire, the investigation of these themes leads student/teachers and teacher/students to a new understanding of the causes of their oppression. Their raised consciousness allows them to emerge from "reality" and begin a on a course to transform it.

Critical constructivist literature looks at structural oppression that creates inequity and maintains status quo. Traditional transmission education is subtractive in that it delegitimizes the knowledge and culture of students who are not from the dominant culture (Valenzuela, 1999). In contrast, critical constructivists argue that knowledge is a social construction and that schools need to adopt curriculum that not only validates the life experience of all students but also works to uncover the causes of historical oppression.

Why Film?

In this section I discuss literature about media literacy and film production with students. Part of being an active citizen in democracy is learning to read (interpret and synthesize) media that we receive daily. As I write this, the *New York Times* reports on a war in Iraq that was initiated by the United States in the name of bringing democracy to the Middle East. This war was justified by the U.S. president, against the will of the United Nations, on his insistence that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. The argument about weapons of mass destruction long since has been dismissed, but the war continues and threatens to expand to surrounding countries, still in the name of spreading democracy. I cannot help but think about the contradiction of a president, who was not elected by popular vote, lying to the United Nations and the American people in order to initiate a bloodbath, all in the name of democracy. Meanwhile, the American people passively nod our heads and wave Old Glory as they are entertained by the evening news. Where is the outrage?

There is a strange congruence in this absurd script. It seems that the transmission style of schooling that breeds passive recipients of "knowledge" is alarmingly similar to the mass media that position viewers as spectators and consumers but not as social actors (Goodman, 2003). I believe that if we are serious about creating democracy in schools and in society, we must help children critically reflect and act on their world. Media literacy is a necessary component in this.

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death,* Neil Postman (1986) painted a dire picture of the effects of television on American society. Interestingly, however, as Lesley Johnson (2001) pointed out, "He changes direction in the last two pages" (p. 5). What Postman argued is that he hopes education could become a means of controlling television. Postman stated,

> Educators are not unaware of the effects of television on their students. Stimulated by the arrival of the computer, they discuss it a great deal—which is to say, they have become somewhat "media conscious." It is true enough that much of their consciousness centers on the question, How can we use television (or the computer, or word processor) to control education? They have not yet got to the question, How can we use education to control television (or the computer, or word processor)? But our reach for solutions ought to exceed our present grasp, or what's our dreaming for? Besides, it is an acknowledged task of the schools to assist the young in learning how to interpret the symbols of their culture. (pp. 162-163)

Johnson (2001) deemed this too adversarial and positioned an argument that poses "high culture versus low culture." She posited that a more suitable question might be, "How can we use television to enhance education?" (p. 6). In her book, *Media, Education, and Change*, Johnson focused on the impact of media literacy education on both teachers and students. In the first part of the book Johnson defined

media literacy and discussed some of the theories that inform it. Next, she connected the theories behind media literacy to both teachers' and students' reflections about the ways in which media education changed their perspectives on themselves and their relationship to schooling.

Johnson (2001) defined media literacy as involving both receptive (the "reading" of media messages) and expressive (the "writing" of media messages) qualities. The receptive component includes analysis of mediated messages. This process requires skills such as interpretation (how does a text come to have meaning?); metacognition (How is it that I came to think of that?); bringing the unconscious to conscious awareness; and decoding stereotypes, archetypes, and expectations for identity (Johnson).

The expressive content of media literacy involves production of media messages, what Johnson (2001) called "writing media." This content requires a different set of skills. Johnson, who has over 20 years' experience working in media literacy education, stated, "The production skills in media literacy education are highly motivational and...bring tremendous enthusiasm to the learning environment" (p. 34). Students seem to enjoy producing media products, see themselves as artists working on a creative process, experience a feeling of power when creating images, and enjoy a cathartic experience. Johnson argued that art is cathartic because "it brings about a release of some emotion or tension as it brings them to conscious expression" (p. 34).

Another educator who has advocated media literacy is Steven Goodman. Like Johnson, Goodman has over 20 years' experience making films and working with public school students in media literacy. In his book, *Teaching Youth Media: A Critical Guide to Literacy, Video Production and Social Change*, Goodman (2003) asserted that media play an increasingly important role in children's lives. He stated, "Children over the age of eight spend the equivalent of a full work week...in front of a screen of some kind of electronic media" (p. 1). The impact of this media consumption contributes to young people's sense of identity, community, and worldview. Goodman expressed concerned that schools neglect to teach young people how to interpret these images. He has advocated a critical media literacy in which schools help children develop skills and habits for analyzing, evaluating, and producing various forms of communication. Goodman has found that by using the camera, children obtain a new lens from which to view their community. Through the creation of documentary films, children begin to critically analyze the taken-for-granted conditions of their communities and their lives. When the children are able to name their "worlds," they start to imagine how they might change them.

Goodman has developed an alternative learning program within the public school system in New York City. This program, called the Educational Video Center (EVC), teaches classes in documentary film to low-income, urban youth. In the workshop the students plan and produce documentary films. Over the years EVC students have produced over 100 documentary films. The teachers at EVC use a pedagogical style that draws on the work of constructivist theorists like Dewey and

Freire. Each semester a new group of students explores issues in their community, generates a theme for their documentary, and then plans and creates the film. The result of this process leaves an impact on the teachers, the students, and countless viewers of their work. Maxine Greene pointed out some of the power of this work in the foreword to Goodman's (2003) book:

> Because these realities are seen and projected from the viewpoints of young people who live and make their lives in such places, readers are taken beyond what even skilled ethnographers can reveal, becoming privy to interchanges, body movements, dialogues about things such as jail and drugs and "gunz." (p. x)

Not surprisingly, the media literacy work of both Johnson and Goodman could be placed within the broader framework of critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy, which positions knowledge as a social construction, challenges educators to analyze dominant ideology and work to counter hegemonic representations. The work of Johnson and Goodman advocates for teachers to use a constructivist approach to guide children through active experiences that the students will find meaningful and relevant to their lives. The role of the teacher when facilitating these experiences is to help children build critical interpretations of dominant ideology rather than passively accept "official knowledge."

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1990) has written about educational media, films produced for classroom use. Michael Apple has argued that the content of official school textbooks includes the knowledge of dominant social groups and excludes the knowledge of subordinate groups (cited in Ellsworth, 1990). Ellsworth (1990) argued that the form of educational media "encodes technical control, authority, legitimacy,

and the 'naturalness' of official knowledge into the structures of everyday life in schools" (p. 10). Although these are not the types of films I used in my study, her focus on the implications of the styles of representation is important to consider. I believe that the overall message and portrayal of subordinated groups by mainstream media parallel the "official knowledge" of educational media.

Ellsworth (1990) stated that film invites the viewer to take up particular kinds of physical, social, and ideological involvements in the unfolding of the film's story or discourse. She cited Len Masterman (1985): "Texts attempt to make sense of us, by offering us positions from which we are invited to see experience in particular ways" (p. 229). When we question, "How are we positioned in this text?" in visual media, we see we are occupying a physical space (by positioning of camera), a social space (by setting and format), and ideological space (by "natural" ways of looking at and making sense of experience). Therefore, to make sense of an educational film, the viewer must be able to adopt "the social, political, and ideological interests that are the conditions for the knowledge it constructs" (p. 13). The film's discourse engages viewers not simply in the active construction of knowledge but in the construction of knowledge from a particular point of view. The viewing experience is a projection of certain kinds of relations between self, others, knowledge, and power. The official point of view rendered by educational media is from a privileged standpoint and is oppressive.

Ellsworth (1990) analyzed 100 films produced for classrooms between 1930 and 1965. She selected 6 films for analysis. She used Masterman's description of

audience positioning to look at ways these films offer viewers positions from which to view and interpret the films. The physical positioning refers to camera shots. The camera placement urges viewers to occupy a certain physical position in relation to the characters and spaces in the film. Educational films differ from traditional fiction where camera angles position viewers along side of characters, in their world. Instead, they use the camera to position the viewer outside the world represented in the films, as if looking in.

This is often aided by a voice-over by an unseen narrator who orders and explains the film's story. Ellsworth (1990) stated, "It is as if the narrator invites us to stand by his (*usually a white male voice*) side and look in on the world of the film" (p. 16, italics added). The world of the characters is not disrupted by the voice-over of the narrator. They cannot hear him. The fact that we (the viewers) hear him places us outside that world as well.

A slightly different variation of this theme is the narrator/character who appears on the screen and addresses the audience directly. These narrators are able to move freely in and out of the world of the story. In the case of the narrator/character the dramatization is interrupted by a cut to a character who looks directly at the camera and addresses the viewers with references that explain and control events in the drama. Here we are offered a position of "all-perceiving" spectators (Ellsworth, 1990, p. 16) and can be everywhere at once. Actions in this format are interrupted and broken down into fragments in order to be explained. Both of the styles of narration parallel conventional scientific empiricism.

Similar to the physical positioning, educational films are invited into a social space. According to Ellsworth (1990), this social space is not that of the characters in the story but that of the narrator:

> The narrator is not of that world or its people—which are marked by ignorance, confusion, apathy, and/or mystery. The narrator/camera positioning lifts us out of that world and into the world of the narrator, where we are invited to share with him a social position of knowledge, mastery, and control over people and objects. (p. 17)

The promise of the educational film is that the viewer can become like the narrator, "He-Who-Knows" (p. 17).

The audience, according to Ellsworth (1990), is also positioned through narrative structure. The form the educational films take is either before/after or problem/solution structure. The "before" state in the films is one of ignorance or confusion over conflicting information. The narrator or the film's story makes it clear to viewers that this is an undesirable condition. The transition to the "after" state in the film takes place through an intervention by an expert (a narrator, teacher, parent, or other adult). In Ellsworth's examples the experts give characters, and viewers, new information and insight. She pointed out, "Narrators consistently speak in declarative, definitive terms, knowing the characters better than they know themselves, defining the future as well as the present" (p. 18). In almost every example, Ellsworth found that the expert is a White man. The viewers are positioned as if we do not have useful knowledge until we receive it through the film. This structure is patriarchal and racist and directly parallels empirical scientific research and traditional transmission oriented pedagogy.

Ellsworth (1990) pointed out that it is important to think about what is left out of this type of narrative and what the implications are of this. She stated,

> Youth culture is seen as the emergent source of new and competing meanings, values, and practices that must be incorporated back into the dominant adult culture. The study films make incorporation seem imperative by characterizing youth culture as dangerous to personal and public safety...They also make youth culture appear excessive and extreme. (pp. 20-21)

This paternalistic positioning is certainly more obvious in the pre-1965 films Ellsworth has analyzed, but I would argue that these characteristics are still implicit in most mainstream media representations of urban youth.

The films Ellsworth (1990) described position viewers in relationships to their represented "others." The films offer a view of reality that can be known with certainty through objective observation. The alternative voices of characters in the films are "mistaken, ignorant, or morally deficient" (p. 21). The message is that if we follow the logical facts presented by the narrator/expert, we will be successful, safe, and happy. This message implies, "Education lifts us out of the worlds of the mistaken, ignorant, or morally deficient (represented 'Others' in educational films) and makes it possible for us to share the social status of white male scientist-narrators" (p. 21).

In addition to the pre-1965 films, Ellsworth (1990) looked at two more contemporary films (from the 1980s). She concluded that although some of the narrative conventions have changed—for example, an Asian and Black woman narrator in one presenting a less hierarchal position—other conventions remain intact and continue to act as barriers to liberatory education.

Ellsworth (1990) concluded by saying that educational media producers must stop creating images and narratives that invite viewers into physical, social, and ideological positions of "He (white, patriarch, scientist, expert)-Who-Knows (with certainty, from the center)" (p. 25). Instead, they should offer a different position, less paternal, perhaps one of "she or he whose decisions about social actions can be made only as a result of dialogue across differences with other social actors" (p. 25).

The literature supports the importance of media literacy. Media literacy not only helps students to analyze the "big picture" of the messages they are consuming on a daily basis, but also helps them to learn the means of production. There is power in learning to communicate through media. The potential, as students take control of the tools, is for them to represent their lives in a way that is counterhegemonic.

Problematizing a Framework of Students' Voices

The issue of what to do with students' perspectives once they are collected presents a problem. How should they be represented? How much theoretical analysis should accompany the students' words? What is the role of the author? These questions have been addressed by Weis and Fine (2000), who argued that it is naïve to believe that voices can stand on their own; thus, theorizing and contextualizing is required. To avoid theorizing when trying to foreground voices does not always work to expose views that are critical of mainstream or hegemonic views. It is possible, and quite likely, that informants have internalized status quo ideology. Fine and Weis (1996) posited that many individual narratives cannot stand on their own without

sufficient analysis, because informants are sometimes less than critical of their circumstances. They often blame themselves to explain the unjust conditions of their lives and often struggle against explanations that look at structural causes of injustice. Therefore, without sufficient analysis these narratives run the risk of reproducing hegemony and the very silences that qualitative researchers hope to uncover. One of the challenges for me in this project was to find a balance where I could allow students the autonomy to conduct research and to represent their own perspectives, but also encourage and guide them to make critical reflections.

Weis and Fine (2000) stated that they differentiate and theorize differently depending upon whose voice is being represented:

> Those voices that have been historically smothered—for example, voices of working-class white women, and men and women of color—we typically present on their own terms, perhaps reluctant to surround them with much of our theory. (p. 53)

In contrast, when they present mainstream dominant voices, like those of White men blaming African American men for society's problems, they "theorize boldly, contextualize wildly, rudely interrupting them to re-frame them" (p. 53). They called this an "epistemological double standard" that serves to create narratives that disrupt mainstream hegemonic views. Similarly, Hurtado and Stewart (as cited in Weis & Fine, 2000) claimed that scholars should underplay hegemonic voices in their essays and instead create counterhegemonic narratives.

As much as I hope to have produced counterhegemonic narratives, I would feel uncomfortable consciously "underplaying hegemonic voices" that arose from my

participants. While I agree, in theory, with the epistemological double standard advocated by Weis and Fine (2000), I am apprehensive to act as jurist and grant myself privilege to reframe participants' voices even more than is already inherent in the nature of qualitative research. Similarly, I would not be content to present them strictly "in their own terms."

My discomfort with the ideas mentioned above stems from my desire to foreground the voices of my students, not my own agenda. For me to advocate centering student perspectives but qualify that by saying that I will only allow voices that I want to hear, or that I feel are worthy of being heard, strikes me as hypocritical. What I hope to have done is to conceptualize a methodology that allows for multiple voices, including those of my participants, to be communicated in their own right. This, however, would have to be done with care so that I would not present a romanticized picture that "exoticizes" student experience (Macedo, 2000).

The problem of what to do with informants' words strikes me as similar to a dilemma that progressive educators have grappled with for many years. Dewey (1938) wrote *Experience and Education* to distance himself from the laissez-faire attitudes of many who claimed to have adopted his philosophy. Even so, many from the right and left critique progressive-style education for a variety of reasons ranging from accusations of lacking rigor to claims that it serves middle-class/bourgeois values and reinforces status quo.

Steinberg (1998) asserted that democratic classrooms need to offer guidance. Progressive teachers have a reputation for viewing any form of guidance as

authoritarianism and therefore bad. Steinberg has been critical of classrooms where the teachers seem to lack an agenda and merely invite students to "talk and share" with the expectation that education will simply emerge. She reluctantly has found herself agreeing with right-wing theorists like Ravitch, Bennett, and Hirsch on this point. She wrote, "Some of the teaching that takes place in the name of democratic education is soft, fluffy and nonsensical" (p. 136).

However, Steinberg and Kincheloe (1998) were quick to point out the contradiction in the traditional educators' critique of progressive education as having low standards and holding more authoritarian pedagogy as rigorous. They wrote,

> There is nothing rigorous about pedagogies that require all students to concurrently "master" decontextualized bits of information—a lockstep absurdity. In this context knowledge despite all of its complexity is reduced to a discreet entity that holds no past or no future. (p. 5)

O'Loughlin (1995) took a strong stance in favor of teacher guidance. Highly critical of discovery learning as alienating to students who are not from middle-class backgrounds, O'Loughlin wrote,

> Liberal-constructivist pedagogies are based on middle-class construction of the child as autonomous, self-regulating, and naturally capable of self-directed learning, given the proper environment. This middle-class construction has come to dominate "liberal-progressive" educational practice despite the presence of dissident voices documenting its class-boundedness and political unconsciousness and protesting its deleterious effects on the prospects of children on the margins. (p. 110)

O'Loughlin pointed out that school is not a neutral place, and some discourses are privileged over others. Rather than glamorizing "voice," which she maintained likely

will reflect status quo values, she advocated that teachers guide students to examine their experiences with a critical lens.

Although I generally agree with the criticisms of progressive education, the problem of the balance between student autonomy and teacher direction is a difficult one. From George Counts (1932) to present-day critical theorists, there are calls for teachers to guide children to political analysis and critique. It always strikes me as arrogant, paternal, and condescending when teachers or researchers claim that they can come in and blast away at hegemony and false consciousness in the process of "empowering" these poor misguided souls.

Many of the criticisms of "democratic" pedagogy, such as arrogance, parallel the criticisms of critical research. I will address some of these critiques later when I discuss methodology. For now I wish to move to another problem that must be addressed, and that is "othering."

Othering

Connected to problems of representation is the neocolonial discourse of the "Other" (Fine, 1994). Fine stated that the relationship between the researcher and the researched often has an oppressive dynamic, because it is the researcher who determines the problem, the nature of the research, and the quality of the interaction. When researchers write *about* others, the relationship between them and their informants is typically obscured. By obscuring, not addressing, the relationship, informants are cast as objects of study that are "*not normal*" or "*not like us*." This

relationship is what Fine called the *self-other hyphen*. She advocated "working the hyphen."

> Creating occasions for researchers and informants to discuss what is, and is not, "happening between," within the negotiated relations of whose story is being told, why, to whom, with what interpretation, and whose story is being shadowed, why, for whom, and with what consequence. (p. 72)

The dynamic of othering is certainly apparent in research that has painted a deficit view of poor people, but even well-intentioned researchers are often drawn to the "exotic other." Weis and Fine (2000) stated that researchers tend to be attracted to the exotic, the bizarre, and the violent (i.e., the other). This often translates to representations that I call "sexy stories of deprivation." By this I mean liberal-progressive research of victimization that tugs on liberal heartstrings, describing the horrid conditions of poverty and attempting to evoke pity. I do not mean to belittle efforts to expose inequity and oppression that exist in our society. These are real problems that are important to address. *How* they are handled by academics is crucial to consider. Whether telling stories of hard conditions that evoke pity or stories of overcoming great odds that evoke resilience, often the outcome is so one sided that it leaves a feeling of exploitation of the participants. Some go so far as to question the whole tradition of ethnographic research. Henley (1998) wrote,

> At worst, they [ethnographic narratives] are also a specialized form of pornography, sharing with films and literature more conventionally classified as such the combination of a voyeuristic interest in the intimate details of other people's lives with the maintenance of distance and, in a desperate search for a lost Eden, the fetishistic cathexis of the "Other." (p. 52)

Research that frames an exotic other reinforces stereotypes and bolsters dominant representations. Often stories that "appear to be great stories . . . feed our collective misunderstandings and renderings of the poor" (Weis & Fine, 2000, p. 48). By "great stories," Weis and Fine (2000) referred to "hot information" that makes for interesting or exciting data. Researchers, especially "outsiders" like myself, must be aware of how the representations we create will be interpreted and used; therefore, we must interrogate our voyeuristic desire to air informants' dirty laundry.

Politics of the Mundane

Weis and Fine (2000) argued for the importance of a closer attention to the mundane. When analyzing data they are careful to avoid sensationalizing stories that cast participants as exotic others. They wrote,

> We explore meticulously the very tedious and mundane sections of the transcripts; those huge sections that are not very exciting...when they—the informants—do what we—the researchers—admit that we do: walk their kids to school, read the newspaper, turn on the television for a break, look for a doctor they can trust, hope their children are safe on the way home from school. (p. 50-51)

Although this may not make for exciting texts, it potentially interrupts the sensationalized representations of the poor that are commonly seen. Foley (1995) gave an example of this when he related the words of one informant, a Mesquaki Indian, who hoped Foley would give an honest and well-rounded portrayal in his book:

> It is always the sensational stuff like eating dogs, or their magical practices, or the drunk Indian raising hell. They never show any Indians with normal

> families and jobs. Indians who go to work, raise their kids, pay their bills, and stay out of trouble. I want to read something that shows us as people just like everybody else. (p. 20)

To be aware of this was particularly important to me as I embarked on a study where I am an outsider to the culture of my participants. By choosing a dialogic, collaborative approach to inquiry, I hoped to avoid representing the other from behind a cloak of invisibility and neutrality. Another strategy I hoped would help create a more open and honest text is reflexivity.

Reflexivity

Patti Lather (1986) identified a key issue for critical researchers: "how to maximize the researcher's mediation between people's self-understandings and transformative social action *without becoming impositional*" (p. 269). The issue of critical research as impositional has been addressed by a number of researchers in a variety of ways. Attempts to do research for others have been called "immensely patronizing" (McRobbie, 1991) because it assumes the researcher would somehow know what is best for the researched.

Similarly, Roman (1993) raised the concern that critical research may "reify and mystify the knowledge required to understand and transform unequal power relations between researchers and research subjects" (p. 282). According to Roman, the researcher's accounts often seem to empower the voices of silenced subordinated groups but actually reinforce a false notion that subjects "passively consent to being researched" (p. 284). Lather (1991) concurred, stating that critical researchers "often

fail to probe the degree to which 'empowerment' becomes something done 'by' liberated pedagogues 'to' or 'for' the as-yet-unliberated, the 'other,' the object upon which is directed the 'emancipatory' actions" (p. 16).

Critical researchers are often good at critiquing injustices in society, but too often they do so without including an analysis or recognition of their role or embedded privilege. Roman (1993) spoke of researchers who act as "voyeurs," attempting to "go native" or as "intellectual tourists" acting like a "fly on the wall." In both cases, after establishing a degree of intimacy the researcher is able to leave the scene and go on with academic life. The privilege of the critical researcher to name reality and identify problems within society is itself an instance of reproduction of status quo. I believe there is a parallel here to White privilege addressed by Frankenberg (1993). The White, middle-class women in Frankenberg's study could often identify and oppose racism's negative effects on people of color; however, they were unable to connect this to their own privilege that accompanies their being White in the same racist society. According to Scheurich (2002), "We can criticize the world out there day after day, but if we don't also criticize our own subjectivity, we leave one of the main tropes of white racist modernism not only untouched but also active in reproduction" (p. 52).

Lather (1986) called for "openly ideological approach to critical inquiry and the necessity of self-reflexivity of growing awareness of how researcher values permeate inquiry" (p. 2). This type of self-reflexivity will "enable us to look closely at our own practice in terms of how we contribute to dominance in spite of our

liberatory intentions" (p. 15). Feminist researchers have proposed a number of epistemological and methodological ways to better attend to our subjectivity and open research to a more collaborative process.

However, even within feminist research are questions about how collaborative a study can be and how equally power really can be distributed between researcher and the researched (Goldstein, 2000). In my case there is the additional complication of being an adult working with children. McRobbie (1991) expressed concern that even with collaborative data gathering and analysis, feminist researchers may be unwilling or unable to hear the voices of participants when they do not support the research agenda. According to McRobbie,

> If we [feminist researchers] are to have any relevance to women and girls outside the movement today, we have to learn what they are thinking about and how they experience a patriarchal and sexist society. It is vital that these women speak back to us who are sometimes over-comfortably placed in a cozy feminist culture about their discontents. It may well be that a whole range of our favorite principles and practices would be undermined if not wholly dislodged as a result. (p. 71)

If critical researchers actually listened to their "oppressed participants" and the message was something that contradicted their a priori assumptions, could they stomach it, or would they retreat into notions of false consciousness?

The research around this issue has helped to put into perspective something that has troubled me for some time: When being critical of society, ego plays a large role. How willing are critical researchers to hear the message of others? Not just a scathing criticism of society, but of ourselves in that society. And not just a criticism of our roles in an unjust society, but a call for us to stop being so domineering and

finally to shut up and take a supportive role rather than always having to be in the driver's seat. Sleeter (2002) addressed how men should be involved in eliminating sexism.

> Eliminating sexism requires changing male behavior; men cannot simply opt out and leave sexism to women to address. Changes in male behavior would include learning to be quiet and not dominate conversations; not to speak for women; recognizing that male privileges nurture a sense of self-assurance that men tend to take for granted and do not see, even when they are trying to help. Changes in men would also include learning to share with us in a reciprocal fashion that respects what women can do; learning to step aside; learning to listen as nondefensively as possible when women try to tell them what bothers us; and generally taking us seriously. (p. 45)

Sleeter argued that this does not stop at sexism; gender in this case could be substituted with White racism. I agree that her insight has relevance broader than gender. In fact, I would argue that Sleeter's words speak directly to the work that White people must do on ourselves if we are to participate in activist work of any nature. Given its oppressive history, this is especially true for White people who wish to conduct social science research that focuses on societal inequality connected to racism, classism, or sexism.

This is why I tried to design a project that was simple in appearance, but with a closer look was very complicated, like life itself. The project has layers designed to provide pathways for a variety of levels of interpretation and representation. The many layers are intended to work counter to master narratives that preserve social order and hide the author's privileged stance. These master narratives, what Richardson (1994) called "mechanistic scientism," present the textual depiction as objective truth as if the scientists who create them are omniscient (Emihovich, 1995).

"Adherence to this model," wrote Richardson, "requires writers to silence their own voices and to view themselves as contaminants" (p. 517). Not only are the authors of the text seemingly absent in such a model, the participants being represented are exploited when "their stories" are represented unproblematically.

Weis and Fine (2000) proposed that in order to write in a meaningful fashion we must write the "stories that lie beneath the surface of the final product" (p. 2). This is similar to Emihovich's (1995) proposition "to tell stories or create narratives where the purpose is not to relate the *truth* but to come to a sense of shared understanding as to what is *known*" (p. 38). For these reasons I attempted to construct a methodology that would allow for various levels of representation and interpretation. On one hand you have the story of the process of groups of students collaboratively creating projects that depict their mutual perceptions of, and experiences in, school. This story is filtered and told by me, the researcher/teacher. Another layer is the products, the actual movies that the students made. This can be seen by others and represents a pathway for students to make their views known to a wider audience. I seemingly did not have as much power over this representation; however, I used their findings as part of my data as I wrote about their perceptions of school. Additionally, there is the context in which these stories take place. In this case we have an urban middle school that serves a student body that is predominantly students of color and from low-income households. The majority of the teachers in this school are White, as is the principal investigator and author.

Although I shy away from calling my work postmodern, I would like to draw upon some of the issues postmodern theorists surface, what Foley (2002) called "deconstructivist reflexivity." Rather than evoking reality as an objective and static description, those who use deconstuctive reflexivity attempt to present text as fragmented and polyphonic (Foley, 2002, p. 479). Lather and Smithies (1997) provided an example of such an attempt. In their book *Troubling the Angels*, they used form to present multiple stories and different possibilities for interpretation. Instead of a linear narrative representation of their investigations on women with HIV, they created a collage of pictures, raw data from participants, information about AIDS, and their own reflections.

Lather (1997) discussed the motivation behind the interpretive and textual strategies she and Smithies used in *Troubling Angels*. She wrote,

> Situated in the problematics of data analysis and text construction, this chapter records the web of paradoxes from within which feminist researchers work, given the indignity of being studied, the violence of objectification. It also probes the inescapability of being placed in a position of speaking with, of, and for others from partial, situated, densely invested positions. (p. 234)

Lather maintained that the aim was to create a "multilayered text designed to interrupt the reductiveness of the restricted economies of representation that characterize mainstream social science" (p. 234). By using form to create a complex and multilayered text, Lather and Smithies tried to approach a topic that is so incredibly difficult that it is beyond our frame of reference; therefore, they worked at "evoking insight into what not knowing means" (p. 254). This goes against the reader's "narrative urge" to make sense of the situation. Lather (1997) stated, "In a space

where untroubled witnessing won't do, the text undercuts any immediate or total grasp via layers of point-of-view patterns" (p. 255).

Although I did not style my format after the work of Lather and Smithies, I drew upon their efforts to disrupt linear and unproblematic ethnographic depictions. Rather, I have attempted to portray the complex nature of representation by employing deconstructive reflexivity.

Along these lines and related to my goal of exposing the "stories that lie beneath the surface of the final product" is "intertextual reflexivity" (Foley, 2002). This type of reflexivity involves researchers' being self-conscious about the narratives they produce. The representation strives to communicate a transparency in order to expose the author and the historical context that frames his/her interpretations. An example of this can be found in various movies. Foley used the example of Truffaut's *Day for Night* (Stam, 1985), which is a "movie about making a movie." The creation of an "aporia" or "gap of uncertainty that the movie is really a copy of life" (Foley, 2002, p. 478) forces the viewer to think about issues of fact and fiction.

Reciprocity

Another issue that I feel is important to address in social science research is reciprocity. Lather (1986) made a strong case for reciprocity in research. She defined reciprocity as a "give and take, a mutual negotiation of meaning and power" (p. 263)

and proposed that researchers should "consciously use our research to help participants understand and change their situations" (p. 263).

All too often researchers go to a site, extract information, and leave nothing in return. I wanted to develop a project that would give something back to my participants. In the spirit of dialogue I believe research should be a two-way street. I would love to state that my participants had a transformative experience as they learned to reflect critically on their lives and thus gained what Freire (1970) called *concientization*. However, I make no such claims, nor do I believe it is prudent for others to do so. Instead, I tried to provide my participants with concrete skills and experience that may serve them in their lives as students.

Guajardo and Guajardo (2002) stated that critical ethnography is not just about giving people voice but "should be about giving people skills, allowing people to create their knowledge, and in the process sharing and co-creating the power. In short, critical ethnography can be pedagogical in theory and in practice" (p. 284). Although I would not call my project ethnography, I agree with this goal and believe it is a valuable insight for other forms of research as well.

In this project reciprocity came in the form of the technological skills of digital movie production. In part, this idea stemmed from the reflections of Scheurich (2002) about a video documentary entitled *Labores de la Vida/The Labors of Life*. Scheurich and his colleagues worked in collaboration to create a film about the experiences of migrant agricultural workers. A number of the people involved in making the documentary had themselves grown up as migrant workers, and the

participants played some key roles in making the film. In addition, the film is entirely in the words of the participants. These are just some of the measures taken to represent in an antiracist and respectful way. Scheurich commented on one critique of the work by a participant:

> He said that in his view we brought this equipment and expertise into his community; got his friends, students, and his colleagues on the documentary; left the community with our expertise and equipment; and completed the documentary. While he and the other participants thought the documentary was well done and did "represent" the participants in a way they approved, when we left, no member of his community had learned new expertise that they could then use to support and empower their own community. (p. 12)

This criticism highlights the importance of reciprocity in fieldwork. I hope to have conceptualized a project that did not simply extract from participants but gave something back in return.

Summary

I am drawn to the critical paradigm because of its bold declaration for research to be value laden. I find this to be perhaps the most honest approach because other paradigms seem to carry ideology or political biases hidden under the surface with a guise of objectivity or of being apolitical. While I believe being open about the ideological intentions of the research seems more honest, I am troubled by the idea that critical research, particularly that done by White academics, could actually be reproducing status quo more than achieving its stated intentions of dismantling hegemony.

Simply put, I want to disrupt traditional notions of research that I consider alienating and arrogant. A large motivation for this project is to contribute to research that struggles to dismantle the "cult of expert." Rather than "give voice" or "empower" participants, I want to devise a way to share the power of representation. One possible way is to arm students with skills that they want. I hope that this project informs research and curriculum by suppressing my own agenda/ego and allowing students to tell a story. Maybe this is similar to what Fine (1994) called "arrogance reduction." I would call it a critical-constructivist epistemology with a peppering of humility.

This chapter has addressed relevant literature in building a critical constructivist conceptual framework that foregrounds students' voices. There is a need to listen to students' perceptions about their experiences at school. Although students are the ones who have the most to benefit from, and the most to lose, in educational reform, they are rarely asked. There is a lack of research that solicits the voices of students. They have plenty to offer, they are articulate and willing to speak, and they deserve to be heard.

I have reviewed literature that relates to students voices. In addition, I have addressed literature that relates to my specific research context and methodology. I have discussed why film was the chosen medium for soliciting students' voices in this study. In addition I have included treatment of traps that I hoped to avoid when employing a critical constructivist framework. These themes include "othering,"

politics of the mundane, reflexivity, and reciprocity. I now go on to discuss the specifics of the methodology used in this study.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Although I did not formulate the specifics of my research question until I was well into my graduate coursework, the seeds of my question were germinating long before this time. I became interested in texts that attempt to foreground the voices of marginalized peoples when I was a Spanish major as an undergraduate. I was particularly drawn to a genre of 20th-century Latin American literature called *testimonial narrative*. Works in this genre include fictional and expository texts that highlight injustice by listening to the poor and oppressed. The testimonial narrator writes from the position of the poor and is a direct victim of injustice. An example of such work, *La Noche de Tlatelolco* (Poniatowska, 1971), chronicled the 1968 massacre by the army of peaceful protesters in Mexico City. In this book Elena Poniatowska used photographs, interviews (including students, workers, fathers, mothers, professors, soldiers, and politicians), poems, protest signs, demonstration chants, and her own poetic narrative to create a mosaic of voices that together express the magnitude of this tragic event. Although I did not know it at the time, my interest in this genre influenced my decision to design a dissertation that attempted to foreground the voices of students, especially those who are least often heard in society.

My experiences working at the refugee camp furthered my interest in the potential for exploring voice. As I explained in chapter 1, it was not until I was forced

to be quiet that I began to understand the importance of listening. Although the philosophy of the camp was designed with the intentions of empowering the refugees to practice agency and exercise voice, it may have been the "Gringo" volunteers like myself who learned the most from the experience.

A few years later, I was inspired to become an elementary school teacher after reading *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). The work of Freire added to my interest in listening to the voices of the oppressed and working with them to reflect on injustice and struggle for change. Using a constructivist framework, Freire pointed to education as a tool for dialogue and consciousness raising.

As I made my way through doctoral coursework and closer to proposing my dissertation research I learned of critiques of the critical paradigm. The criticisms include claims of fetishistic "othering" (Fine, 1994), being patronizing (McRobbie, 1991), being arrogant (Lather, 1986), and hypocrisy, actually reproducing societal domination (Roman, 1993). Although I was still intent on a dialogic project that attempted to foreground voices, I wanted to take measures to avoid these traps.

I wanted to conceptualize a methodology that would be aligned with my political worldview as well as with my theoretical framework and also address the criticisms of those on whom I was drawing. Without talking about "empowerment" or "transformation," I sought to design a study where participants truly participate. The term *participant* is used in qualitative research to replace the word *subject* often used in quantitative research. The word *participant* implies a more active role than subject, which leaves the feeling of an object placed under a microscope for objectification. I

hoped to include participants who would act as coresearchers, taking an active role in the collection of data and in the analysis and interpretation of themes.

The issues addressed above provided the framework for the conceptualization of my methodology. I now provide the specifics of my methodology. I begin by introducing the participants and describing the setting. Next, I outline the data sources, the process of data analysis, and issues of representation and trustworthiness in the study. I conclude with reflections about leaving the field.

Participants

I used a purposeful sample (Patten, 2002) of 12 participants in my study. Almost all of the participants were eighth graders at the time of data collection. The exceptions were Griselda, who was repeating seventh grade, and Fransisco, who was in sixth grade.

All of the children I asked to participate in this study were my former students in elementary school. I chose from a group who were in eighth grade during the time of my research because I had been their teacher for 2 years in elementary school (third and fifth grades). In addition, I had known some of them for years prior to being their third-grade teacher because I taught some of their siblings. Therefore, I had a longstanding relationship with them spanning at least 6 years and as much as 9 years. I believe this relationship gave me a jumpstart on the research because I had a previously established rapport. In addition, I care about these children and wanted to know how they were faring in their education.

Beyond selecting children who were my former students, I selected participants based on interest in taking part in the project. Just before winter break I spent 10 days at Live Oak attending the three lunch periods each day. During this time I circulated the cafeteria and spent time reconnecting with my former students, discussing my research proposal with them, and inviting them to participate.

Of the 21 former students from my class I was able to speak with 15 of them. The 6 children whom I did not contact had moved or were attending other area schools. Not all of the 15 students who were attending Live Oak were interested in participating in my study. One student told me she could not participate because she had to take care of younger siblings after school. The other 3 who declined the invitation were flat out not interested. This left me with 11 former students who expressed an interest in participating.

I gave consent forms to each of them to sign and to secure parental permission. I figured that 8 participants would be an optimal number for my study and imagined that I could start with a few extra in case a few did not get consent forms signed, had to move, or chose to drop out for other reasons during the data collection. All of the 11 students returned signed consent. Tony's mother agreed to allow him to participate on the condition that his younger brother also could join us, since they walk home together. This brought my total count up to 12. One student dropped out of the study after 2 weeks. Nadira cited conflicting after-school demands as the reason for her decision. All of the others stayed in until the end of the planned data collection period. This left me with slightly more participants than I originally

planned, but I figured it was better to have too many than not enough. In retrospect it would have been good to have 8, my original plan, because it would have been easier to manage, especially with the demands for the limited equipment and time.

I would have liked to have had a more racially and ethnically diverse group of participants, but the vast majority of my former students are Latino and this was reflected in my sample. However, I did end up with one Anglo student, one African American student, and one East Indian student. Of the 3 who declined to participate, 1 was African American and 2 Latina. Seven of the participants are girls and 4 are boys, thus giving some diversity in gender. In addition, there is diversity in academic tracks of the various participants. Six of the students were participants in the magnet program at Live Oak, and 6 attended the comprehensive school. Of the 6 in the comprehensive school, 2 were in special education, 1 in honors classes, and the remaining 3 on the regular track.

All of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms. Originally I asked my participants to create their own pseudonyms. This struck them as an odd request and quickly degenerated into a competition to think up the craziest name. Rather than write my paper using names like "Butterfly" and "Pimp," I asked them if they would allow me to think up pseudonyms for them. They all agreed and I ended up creating the names.

I give a brief introduction to each of the children who participated in this study. These descriptive paragraphs are not meant to give a comprehensive view of each of the children. Instead, they give just enough information to provide context to

begin reading the paper. I hope their personalities will develop in more depth as the data are presented that make up the stories of this paper.

Beth

Beth is a White girl from a working-class family. Her mother and father are divorced. She lives with her father and a younger brother and a younger sister. Her mother is remarried and lives in a small town just northwest of the city. She sees her mother on weekends. Beth is in the magnet program at the middle school and is a very high-achieving student. She considers herself very intellectual and prides herself on intelligence.

She is one of the few White kids in the magnet who resides in the neighborhood of the school. In addition, she is politically conservative. In these two ways she sees herself as an outsider in the magnet and in the larger school population. Beth puts great stock in her education. Since elementary school she has worked hard and been very concerned about her academic standing. In addition to taking the highest level courses offered in the magnet, even gaining high school credit for some of them, Beth participates in extracurricular activities. Her passion is drama, and she puts a great deal of energy into the drama club at school. She was actively recruited by a number of area high schools and eventually decided on the one with a performing arts magnet.

Sonia

Sonia was born in the United States to parents from Mexico. At home Sonia's parents speak Zapateco, a language from their native Oaxaca, and Spanish. Sonia lives with her father, mother, and older brother, who goes to the local community college. Her father works hanging sheetrock, and her mother is in the fast-food service industry. The family members are devout Jehovah's Witnesses, and this takes a central place in their lives.

She lives outside the area for the school, but her parents drive her to and from school each day because they feel it is better than the school in their neighborhood. Although she remained in bilingual classes throughout elementary school, by third grade Sonia had fully transitioned to English-language instruction. Sonia's school career has been marked by academic excellence. From a very early age she has stood out as a student who is serious, thoughtful, and motivated. In fifth grade she won a citywide essay contest on why she would like to be mayor for the day. Her reward was to spend part of the day acting as mayor in a council meeting. She breezed through the legal jargon as she read at the podium, evoking comments from council members that she was a better reader then they. In fifth grade when it came time to prepare for middle school, she needed little encouragement to apply for the magnet program.

At the time of this study Sonia was a student in the magnet program. According to her teachers she continues to do well academically, although they complained about her excessive chattiness with her peers. At school she strives to

achieve a balance of the social and the academic. She places great import on friendships and looks unfavorably at students in the magnet who she feels "show off" and try to prove they are smarter than everyone else.

In addition to magnet Language Arts and Social Studies, Sonia takes Advanced Placement Math and Advanced Placement Science. According to Sonia, her favorite classes are Social Studies and Orchestra "because they are never boring." She also enjoys Science, but only because the teacher "doesn't care if the students talk," so she spends time socializing. Finally, her math teacher is "cool, because she lets us listen to music while we work."

Bernice

Bernice is an eighth-grade magnet student. She was born in Mexico and moved to Texas with her family as a baby. Her father works in construction and owns his own business. She lives with her parents, one younger brother, and two older sisters. She looks up to her sisters. They both did well in school, but neither finished college. One started at the community college but dropped out; the other opted to get married and stay home with her children and did not go to college. Bernice told me that both sisters regret not going to college; she sees their frustration and wants to make sure she is able to go.

Bernice was in bilingual education through her elementary schooling. In fifth grade she transitioned to English-language instruction. In elementary school she always did her work but was not considered one of the highest achieving students in

the class. In the end of fifth grade she applied to the magnet program at the middle school. She has made it through the middle school magnet and currently looks forward to rejoining her friends in the comprehensive track in high school. She has decided she is not cut out for accelerated academics. Bernice is an avid soccer player and is captain of the girls' soccer team at Live Oak.

Nadira

Nadira is Indian American. Her family owns and runs a local hotel where she also lives. Since elementary school she has been a very good student with a lot of self-discipline. Her family puts a great deal of import on education; at times she seems to feel a burden from the pressure to succeed academically. In fifth grade she applied for the middle school magnet and was accepted. In addition to being a serious student in the magnet school, Nadira is a cheerleader and is active in the drama program at the school. She seems to be able to balance high academics with positive social interactions.

After 2 weeks of our after-school meetings, Nadira stopped coming. I found her at lunch one day and asked her why she had been missing. She was apologetic and explained that she was overextended trying to balance academics and extracurricular activities. In addition to her usual load of magnet courses, cheerleading, and drama club, she was in the process of applying to an exclusive prep school, which was taking a great deal of time. She told me she would try to come back if she could manage the time, but unfortunately this never happened.

Ines

Ines was born in Mexico and moved to Texas with her family when she was a baby. She was in bilingual classes through elementary school, though she transitioned to English instruction in third grade. She is fully proficient in both English and Spanish. In elementary school she was a good student and conscientious about doing her work. From an early age she had an excellent and dry sense of humor. In fifth grade she applied for the magnet program in the middle school and was accepted. She continues in that program, although she is not very enthusiastic about academics and has received failing grades in math for a couple of semesters.

Jaqueline

Jaqueline is a Mexican American girl born in Texas. Her father is Mexican American and her mother is from Mexico. She was in bilingual classes in elementary school starting in prekindergarten. By third grade she had transitioned to English-language instruction. She is fully proficient in English and Spanish and speaks both with her friends.

Jaqueline was always a good student. She was one of the top students in our class and always was very conscientious about her schoolwork. By fifth grade Jaqueline seemed less interested in academics and was dedicating more energy to social relations with friends. She continued to do well academically but did not seem to go beyond the minimum to get by. When many of her classmates were applying for

the magnet program at the middle school, Jaqueline decided that she was not interested in doing this. We (all of her teachers) begged and pleaded with her to apply for the magnet, but she refused.

At middle school she has many friends. She hangs out with a group of children who are in both the magnet and the honors classes. They are ethnically mixed but mostly Hispanic. Jaqueline is not in the magnet program but takes all honors classes. She is still a successful student, but she claims school is boring and dedicates a lot of her energy to social relations with friends. Jaqueline plays the violin in the school orchestra.

Griselda

Griselda moved to Texas from Mexico in third grade. She was an extremely quiet girl; she almost never talked when she was in my class, and when she did it was very difficult to hear her because she talked in a whisper.

She lives with her parents and three younger siblings in a trailer park that is set off from a major road. Primarily Mexican immigrants populate this low-profile housing community. Many of the inhabitants are undocumented workers and have sought this location for low rent and because it does not attract attention. This parallels Griselda's behavior at school in that she seems to try to get by without making waves or attracting too much attention.

Last year she went to Mexico to visit a sick grandmother. She ended up staying there for close to 3 months. When she was able to return to school she was

informed that she would have to repeat the seventh grade. Although neither she nor her parents were happy about this, they felt there was nothing they could do about it. She currently is in seventh grade in the regular academic track of the comprehensive school.

She continues to be extremely quiet. In our after-school club discussions Griselda never spoke. Some of the kids in the group made note of that, but it was not a surprise, since we all have known each other for a long time and they see each other in school every day. When I talked to her one on one she answered in one-word whispers. When she worked in her small group I could see her talking to Bernice and Thalía but always very quietly. Although she did not talk in the group discussions, I feel she was a contributing participant because she actively helped her partners when they made their movie. She attended our sessions regularly; she only missed one time and informed me she would not be there on that day because she had to make up a test in one of her classes. Her presence is not felt in the write up of the study because she was so quiet, but she left her mark as a contributing member, and I thank her for her participation.

DeAndre

DeAndre is an African American boy and was in the eighth grade at the time of the study. He was in a fully self-contained special education classroom. This means he mixed with the general population at school during lunch and for two elective courses per day (physical education and health). He has been in special

education since third grade. In fifth grade he was in my class, although he spent most of his time at school with another teacher.

He lives with his mother and older brother in a housing project near Live Oak school. Although he is very capable academically, he does not seem to apply himself in school. He is very enthusiastic about Yu-Gi-Oh cards (a Japanese anime card game and television show).

Joe

Joe is a Mexican American boy. He was in eighth grade in the regular track at school at the time of this study. He loves to play soccer and video games. He does not show much interest in academics at school. His friends sometimes call him Jackie Chan because of the way he looks. He tries to blend in, trying not to draw a lot of attention to himself.

Tony

Tony is a Mexican American boy and was in the eighth grade of the regular track of the school at the time of the study. He was in my class in third and fifth grades. He usually acted like the class clown. He was very intelligent but was not eager to apply this intelligence to school. He was in bilingual classes the whole way through elementary, although he never had a good grasp of Spanish. He lives in the same housing project as DeAndre. He lives with his mother, who speaks very little English, an older brother, an older sister, and a younger brother (Fransisco). Tony

understands Spanish and speaks some, but he always appeared uncomfortable when doing so. The other children in the class often teased him when he tried to speak, and this made him even more reluctant.

In fifth grade his mother wanted him tested for attention-deficit disorder (ADHD) and was successful in getting him on medication. It struck me as sad, because he soon became glazed over like a zombie walking around the classroom, and then when the medication wore off he would go to the other extreme and act disruptive. I did not ask if he still took medication, but during our sessions he did not seem to have trouble paying attention and staying focused.

Fransisco

Fransisco was in sixth grade at the time of the study. He is Tony's brother and goes home with him, so his mom asked if he could come to our sessions. Since he was there I asked him if he wanted to participate, and he did.

In our sessions he was fairly quiet. His input was quite minimal. Mostly he complained of being bored. Often he put his head down on the table. He offered his opinion one time when he said he hates school and if he did a documentary on one of his teachers it would be hurtful. Other than that he complained when children spoke Spanish, criticized Beth for "using big words," and spent a good deal of the time with his head on the table like he was sleeping.

The time he was most animated and engaged was when he was talking about Yu-Gi-Oh cards. Once that became the topic of the movie he seemed motivated to

participate. He told me all about his deck, DeAndre's deck, and the differences between the two. He also took his part in the movie seriously. He rehearsed his lines, which DeAndre wrote out for him. He looks up to the older boys (including his older brother Luis). They are all fans of the card game, and he pays close attention to what they do. He is like a Yu-Gi-Oh apprentice to them.

Thalía

Thalía was born in Mexico. She has been in the United States since third grade. She is the cousin of Ines. She is quiet but not afraid to speak up in class. She speaks both English and Spanish proficiently. She was in Spanish-language instruction and transitioned to English in fifth grade. Spanish is still her preferred language; she is more confident in Spanish and speaks Spanish when she is with friends and at home. In elementary school she was on grade level academically and always exerted a great effort towards schoolwork. In fifth grade she chose to apply to the magnet program in the middle school and was accepted. She attended the magnet at Live Oak from sixth through eighth grades. She does not stand out as a star student, probably because she is reserved and not entirely confident with English, but she does well in all of her classes.

Setting

Live Oak Middle School is located in the south central part of a city in Texas. Located on a main drag and situated atop a hill, the schoolyard overlooks the

downtown area of the city. Across the street from the school an old porno movie theater, which was shut down and refurbished into a short-lived dotcom business, now sits vacant. Other businesses line the street, including a Seven-Eleven convenience store that sits adjacent to the tennis courts and is frequented by the police throughout the day searching for truant students. Trendy clothing boutiques and coffee shops now occupy spaces that were taco stands and gun shops a few years back. Like many of the centrally located neighborhoods in the city, skyrocketing property values are gradually changing the demographics and the flavor of this neighborhood that historically was working class and Latino.

Live Oak enrolls 991 students. The student population is comprised of 64.5% Hispanic, 19.6% White, 14% African American, 0.5% Native American, and 1.4% Asian American students. A large percentage of the White students at Live Oak are in the magnet program and live in other areas of the city. The teachers at the school are 76.2% White, 14.0% Hispanic, 2.8% African American, and 7.0% Asian American (Texas Education Agency, 2005).

The oldest secondary school in the city, Live Oak was originally built as a one-room, white, frame schoolhouse in 1886. The only remaining artifact from the original school is the bronze bell that is prominently displayed in the central courtyard of the current brick structure, which has undergone many renovations and additions throughout the last 119 years.

Upon entering the large blue doors in front of the school, the cafeteria is on the immediate left and the gymnasium and band and orchestra rooms on the right.

Proceeding through the entryway and another set of blue doors leads into the central courtyard of the school. The oak-lined pathways lead to the central office and to a three-story brick building with classrooms. On the far side of the school near the athletic fields are a small number of portable structures used for classrooms.

In addition to the comprehensive school, Live Oak houses the celebrated Humanities and Government Magnet for International Studies, which opened in 2001 and like the comprehensive school serves children in sixth through eighth grades. The *Live Oak Parent Survival Guide* boasts the magnet as "an academic jewel in the Live Oak crown, but it's not a separate physical building with its own cheerleaders, nor is it truly a 'school within a school,' though it has its own director, and students must apply to be accepted." The magnet offers a wide array of upper level classes rarely found in typical middle schools. Such classes include philosophy, Greek, visual media, and many others. In an attempt to be inclusive of all children, these demanding, creative, and fun courses are purportedly open for all students who attend Live Oak.

Data Sources

Much of the research that attempts to foreground students' voices uses interview as the primary means of collecting participants' perceptions and capturing their words (see, for example, Nieto, 2000; Perry, 2002; Powell, 2001). Although this can be an efficient mode of data generation because it allows the principal investigator to guide strategically the flow and content of conversations (Weiss,

1994), it also can be problematic. On one hand, interview is problematic when the interviewer has not established sufficient rapport with the subjects of the interview (Mertens, 1998). However, even with prolonged engagement and even if conducted in an open-ended style where the interviewee helps determine the flow and content of the conversation, what is reported as the words of the interviewees is often masking "uncontrollable play[s] of power" (Scheurich, 1997, p. 74) between all those involved in the conversation. Nadira expressed the problematic nature of interviews in Session 2 when she expressed the opinion that interview is the "worst" form of gathering information because it is a contrived interaction and the interviewee almost certainly will perform depending on how he/she wants to be viewed (see chapter 8).

In an attempt to address the problematic nature of interview as the sole means of collecting students' voices, I designed a study with multiple forms of data generation. The various data sources are meant to triangulate information as well as to serve to open spaces for participants' voices. Data were generated during a semester-long, after-school program that focused on media literacy. During our sessions together, participants created movies and watched and discussed their movies and movies from other sources. In addition to the movie-based data, I wrote field notes and analytic memos after each session to include my own observations and interpretations. I now review each of these sources.

1. I describe the after-school program.
2. I discuss how the after-school sessions were recorded.
3. I tell about the participant-made movies.

4. I describe video-elicitation as a method of extending conversations.

5. I address some nuts-and-bolts issues of using video in research.

6. Finally, I discuss the use of field notes and analytic memos as a data source.

The After-School Program

My data gathering centered on after-school meetings I conducted with my participants. The meetings took place in a classroom at Live Oak Middle School. We met twice a week, on Mondays and Wednesdays, for 1 1/2 hours each time. We met during the second semester of classes, starting in January and continuing until the week after Spring Break (in March). We met 16 times.

The meetings were structured to solicit my participants' perspectives about their experiences in school. Our time was divided between video production and viewing-discussion activities. Similar to the intentions of focus group interviews, the sessions encouraged the interaction of group members in the generation of specific topics (Hatch, 2002). Hatch described the purpose of focus group interviews:

> Focus group interviews rely on the interactions that take place among participants in the group to generate data. The interviewer typically acts as a moderator who encourages participants to generate discussions around particular topics. The goal of focus groups is to create conversation that allows participants to explore a topic in depth. (p. 132)

In a similar way, I tried to act as moderator during the discussions of my participants around particular topics that related to their experiences and perceptions of school. Although not quite focus group interviews, our meetings shared some similarities.

I tried to balance our after-school sessions between whole-group discussion and small group work on production activities. Each of these served as means for generating different kinds of data. I divided our time in the after-school sessions by dedicating Mondays primarily for discussion and Wednesdays for small group work.

On Mondays I took a more active role as facilitator of the group. I structured the after-school sessions to include watching and discussing videos. At times my participants watched professionally made movies, and at other times they viewed their own work. After the viewings I led the participants in open-ended group discussions. This type of data collection, video elicitation, is discussed shortly.

On Wednesdays I dedicated time to teaching mini-lessons for my participants to learn to use the technical equipment required for video production (e.g., camcorders and editing software). In the beginning this took the form of simple activities, such as the scavenger hunt (Session 3) where small groups used the cameras to shoot various aspects of the school and to learn about different camera angles and shots. Later, once the participants became more independent with the equipment and were working on their small group projects (starting on Session 9), more time was dedicated to production of their small group movies. During this time, the participants spent considerable time in small groups planning and editing their small group projects. I backed off considerably during this time and tried to serve primarily as a facilitator when the participants had technical questions.

Participants Filmed the Sessions

Each of the after-school sessions was videotaped and later logged and transcribed. I did the logging and the transcribing, but my participants took turns operating the video camera during the sessions. It was important to me to have my participants do the filming of our sessions rather than to set up the camera on a tripod and leave it unattended in a fixed location to capture an overview of what was occurring. My reasoning for having the students do the filming is connected to my purposes of foregrounding students' voices and excavating "the stories that lie beneath the surface of the final product" (Weis & Fine, 2000).

From a positivist perspective the video is capturing reality simply as it is happening, and so the purpose of videotaping each session would be to have an objective record of the events that transpired (Henley, 1998). However, as Marcus Banks (1995) pointed out, video is a representation of reality, not a direct encoding of it. The perspective of the filmmaker is crucial because it is the filmmaker who decides "where and how long to film, where to place the camera, how to frame the shot, [and] how to determine its duration" (Henley, 1998, p. 43). These decisions place limits on the objectivity of cinematographic images. An important aspect of having students' voices foregrounded in this project was for my participants to contribute to data collection as coresearchers. In a small way, by taking charge of the filming of our sessions they were actively participating in the data collection. Rather than merely being the objects of the gaze of the camera, as they would have been in a fly-on-the-wall style of recording from one fixed position, they took part in directing

the camera's gaze by making the subjective decisions highlighted in the quote by Henley.

Another reason for having participants operate the cameras during our discussions was an ethical consideration. Ting (1998) found that a camcorder left running by itself on a tripod was less obtrusive than when she was standing behind it operating it. After a short time her participants seemed to forget the camera was even there. Limiting the intrusiveness of the camera is considered a good thing when using video for data collection (Hatch, 2002). However, the after-school sessions were not intended to be a naturalistic setting, and as coresearchers my participants needed not only to be reminded about the camera's presence in order to make conscious judgments about what and how they wanted to be represented in the study, but also to take part in determining what would be represented.

Perhaps the most important reason for having the participants do the filming in our sessions is directly related to foregrounding their perspectives. Since I was the one transcribing and logging the footage from each session, I clearly had the most power to determine what was important. One attempt to limit my authorial domination of the project was to force myself to re-view each session through the filter of the subjective gaze of my participants. When I watched the videotapes of our sessions (and I had to do this many times), I viewed the scenes the participants chose to capture. At times I found this very helpful, like when they focused on one of their peers who was actively participating in one of our group discussions. Since I was facilitating the discussions, I could not also operate the camera.

I did not always find the camera work of my participants to be aligned with my ideas on what should be filmed. At times the camera operator chose to focus on aspects of the session that I would have left "beneath the surface of the final product" had I been operating the camera. For example, sometimes they focused on students in the group who were not paying attention and were "off task."

Another example of the disruption of the story I wanted to tell is the many times a participant doing the filming pointed the camera directly at me. When I noticed this it made me uneasy, and I usually asked the participant to redirect the camera back on the students. More often than not, the participant complied with my request, but each incident was recorded and each time I watched the footage from the sessions I was forced to think about who was really the object of the gaze in this study. This brought to the forefront the contradiction inherent in my claims that I was doing collaborative research and that my participants were the ones in charge.

Perhaps the best example of the disruption of my own authorial gaze was when the camera itself became the distraction. In Session 11 when Joe was supposed to be filming the small groups working on editing their movies, the boys hijacked the camera to film themselves playing with Yu-Gi-Oh cards. Instead of gathering the planned "data" of children in the process of making movies about their school experiences, I was left with 20 minutes of footage of DeAndre, Tony, Joe, and Fransisco "messing around." As it turned out, this disruption led to a new direction in their movie project and one of the most powerful examples of student-centered moviemaking in my study. This is discussed in chapter 7.

In sum, having the participants as active collaborators by taking charge of the filming of our sessions opened up the perspective to a broader focus than had I attempted a fly-on-the-wall style of recording from one fixed location. Their contributions forced me to view our sessions through the subjective filter of their chosen focus and therefore disrupted my authorial fingerprint on the project.

The Movies Made by Participants

The videos made by the students were designed to be the space where the students' voices could shine through with the least amount of my authorial fingerprint. Video production seemed like a way to make representation of research interesting and accessible for my eighth-grade participants. Therefore, the movies would be the strongest evidence of my participants' acting as coresearchers in this project. This, it turns out, is much easier to conceptualize than to achieve. The problematic nature of using the student-made movies as a primary data source is discussed through out this paper and addressed in depth in chapter 8.

The original plan was to have all of the participants work together in a Freirian-style, problem-posing project (Freire, 1970). I intended to act as guide helping the group collaborate to generate an essential question, themes, and then an analysis that they would produce into a movie that depicted their perspective on the issues they had highlighted about their school experiences (Shor, 1992).

Early in the project, by Session 2, I reworked my plan based on my observations of the group. Since my primary goal was to allow space for students'

voices by stepping aside, it became obvious that I needed to get out of the way and open up the possibilities for my participants to have more freedom. If I forced them to work together to create a joint movie about their school experiences, I would have to have been heavier handed in my role as director; this flew in the face of my stated goals for a student-centered project.

Instead, I allowed the participants to group together as they pleased to create movies based on topics of their own choosing. As it turned out, most chose to make movies based on some aspect of their school experience or stemming from issues that had been raised by experiences at school (e.g., *A Day at School, Groups in Our School, Does Freedom Exist?).* The one movie that apparently did not deal with a school issue, *Yu-Gi-Oh News Day*, was still very much relevant to school-related themes. Each of these movies is discussed in chapter 4 and then again in later chapters. In addition, the DVD that accompanies this paper has copies of each of the movies

Even with (or especially with) the change of plans, the student-made movies were intended to provide a "polyphonous" account (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) of the data. The cameras and the editing process were to be used as tools, like a microscope for a cell biologist, to assist the young filmmakers in carefully reflecting on their experiences (Henley, 1998). The hope was that the products, the final versions of the movies and the ensuing discussions around them, would highlight an emic account offering an insider's perspective on schooling. Furthermore, these representations would be a step removed from the problematic power dynamic typically found in

representation highlighted by Harper (1998) when he stated, "We are often reminded that the powerful, the established, the male, the colonizer typically portray the less powerful, established, female and colonized" (p. 32).

There have been some examples of researchers involving participants in filmmaking and other visual means such as photography as a way of bridging outsider and insider perspectives of the researcher and participants. A famous example is *Through Navajo Eyes* (Worth & Adair, 1972) where researchers instructed Navaho participants in the mechanics of camera operation and asked them to "narrate their culture" through visual means to provide an insider's perspective. Similarly, Ewald (1985) gave cameras to children in Appalachia to voice their own stories.

The attempts to share in the construction of knowledge and perhaps empower participants to represent themselves are not without their critics. A researcher runs the risk of romanticizing the voice of the participants (Macedo, 2000). Any attempt to foreground voices of participants runs the risk of masking power relations in the study. Henley (1998) highlighted an important critique of such work:

> For some authors, such projects of collaboration with indigenous subjects, be it with the latter as active participants in the development of the film or even as filmmakers themselves, are politically suspect. For them, these projects represent attempts to overcome the so-called "representational crisis" by pretending that indigenous peoples have thereby been "given a voice" whereas in fact they are merely being brought in as supporting bit-players in the perpetuation of self-interested western constructions of the world. (p. 52)

This statement makes suspect the whole field of ethnographic work, not just film, as contributing to the control of marginalized peoples. The desire to see participant-made movies certainly has a voyeuristic element (Harper, 1998). However, I believe

that if done respectfully and with a great deal of reflexivity, there is a potential for a powerful two-way flow of information between researcher and participants.

In this work I have tried to address the critiques of coauthorship in research by emphasizing the polyphonic goals of the study. Rather than present the movies made by my participants on their own, I offer them to the reader in a variety of contexts. The DVD presents the movies as the participants made them—although even this, as I highlight in chapter 8, is not free of my intrusion. The movies are also presented with my analysis, interpretations, and contextual information in the body of the data chapters. In these chapters I take the liberty of theorizing about the work of my participants and thus insert my own voice alongside those of my participants.

Video-Elicitation

Visual anthropologists and sociologists often have used photographs during data collection as an interview device. This is commonly referred to as photo-elicitation. In this process the researcher assembles photographs on the assumption that the images will have significance for the interviewees. Prosser and Schwartz (1998) described the process of photo-elicitation: "The photographs are shown to individuals or groups with the express aim of exploring participants' values, beliefs, attitudes, and meanings in order to trigger memories, or to explore group dynamics or systems" (p. 124).

The technique, which is basically a variation on the theme of open-ended interviewing, offers the possibility of collaboration between researcher and

participants rather than a one-way flow of information (Harper, 1998). Typically in photo-elicitation the researcher shares photographs that she or he has taken of the participant's world, and the participant provides in-depth responses to complex questions stimulated and guided by the images. Harper described the desired outcome of the photo-elicitation interview:

> A shocking thing happens in this interview format; the photographer, who knows his or her photograph as its maker suddenly confronts the realization that she or he knows little or nothing about the cultural information contained in the image. As the individual pictured interprets the image, a dialogue is created in which the typical research roles are reversed. The researcher becomes a listener and one who encourages the dialogue to continue. The individual who describes the images must be convinced that their taken-for-granted understanding of the images is not shared by the researcher, often a startling realization for the subject as well! (p. 35)

Similarly, in some instances video images have been used for the purposes of eliciting in-depth responses during interviewing. Spindler and Spindler (1987) used video images as "evocative stimuli" and "reflective interviewing tools" in a comparative study of German and American views of elementary education. Another study made use of videotapes of "typical days" to show to children, staff, and parents at Chinese, Japanese, and American preschools to stimulate a cross-cultural "multi-vocal" ethnographic text (Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989).

I used a variation of this idea to incorporate video as a catalyst for discussion in the after-school meetings with my participants. Unlike the example above, I did not use video I had taken of my participants in their world; however, I did select videos I believed would resonate for the participants based on theme and style. Some of the films I used in the interview/discussions were professionally made. These included

Hollywood narrative films and documentaries (see appendix for list of movies). What they all had in common, and what I hoped would evoke reaction and deep discussion in my group meetings, was the portrayal of urban students at school. Immediately after watching each video I led an open-ended discussion with my participants. The discussions were videotaped and then logged and transcribed as data records.

In addition to Hollywood films and professionally made documentaries, I used video made by my participants to elicit discussion. This took place in Session 5 when we watched and discussed their short videos based on a scavenger hunt activity and at the culmination of the after-school meetings when we watched and discussed their small group movie projects (Sessions 15 and 16). Similar to what Harper (1998) described as photo-elicitation, but in reverse since the participants themselves were the filmmakers, the process of discussing taken-for-granted scenes of school led to in-depth discussions about culture, the context of school, and my participants' perceptions of their school experiences. In the group discussions the flow of information was more than two way because the discussions included the filmmakers, the other participants who did not make the film being discussed, and me (the principal researcher). These discussions were videotaped and then logged and transcribed as data records.

The third and final form of video-elicitation I used in this study was an attempt to triangulate information by member checking while steering group discussion deeper on specific topics I hoped to have elaborated. This was achieved by playing back segments of the participants' prior discussions from previous after-

school meetings. After watching the segment the group was asked to discuss what they had said. This style of discussion served to layer the data record.

A good example of the layering of data with this type of elicitation took place in Session 10 when my participants discussed societal racism. The discussion in Session 10 was stimulated after we watched a segment of a discussion they had in Session 8 about racism in mainstream media. The discussion from Session 8 had been elicited from watching a segment of their discussion in Session 5 when one participant, Sonia, commented about the boring routine of her daily life and her opinion that it was not worthy of a movie. Video in this case became a great tool for encouraging group discussion and creating layered multivocal texts (Tobin et al., 1989). Unfortunately, this type of video-elicitation did not occur as much as I would have liked. In part because of time constraints, I was not able to layer the discussion data this way on many occasions. Also I blame my lack of experience as a researcher for my inability to make use of this layering technique on more occasions. It is, however, something I would like to explore in future research projects.

Using Video

Video recording is a powerful tool and can improve the quality of many studies (Hatch, 2002). Graue and Walsh (1998) noted value in using video to assist in observations, because "a video record of an event allows it to be observed many times and is particularly useful for microlevel analysis" (p. 109). In fact, image-based

researchers have used video in ethnographic fieldwork in a variety of ways since the invention of the camera (Prosser, 1998).

Video, however, has limitations that must be factored into the research plan.

1. One such limitation is the inaccessibility of videotapes as data records because of the amount of time it takes to view them as a whole (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

2. Another is the expense of the equipment necessary for video documentation (Hatch, 2002), which I can attest is difficult to manage, especially on the limited budget of a graduate student.

3. A third limitation is what Graue and Walsh (1998) called the "being-there" illusion. They stated, "Watching the video can give the viewer the false sense of experiencing what she is viewing, of actually being there" (p. 110). The problem inherent in this false sense is that without deep background knowledge of the context and the characters who are being taped, deeply understanding what is going on may be severely limited.

4. Another limitation is the obtrusiveness of the video equipment (Ting, 1998). The more equipment that is used, the more present it is in the minds of the people being observed. An observer with pencil and a notebook causes far less of a spectacle than the presence of cameras and microphones.

5. Finally, using video makes it more difficult to ensure confidentiality to participants, since their faces, voices, and actions are recorded on videotape (Hatch, 2002). The informed consent signed by the participants of a study involving video

must include information that spells out how the data will be used, how they will be stored, and who will have access to them. Participants must know if video footage might be used for purposes other than data analysis (e.g., as part of presentations, training films, or coursework examples), and they must have the chance to veto such uses after they have had the opportunity to view the footage in question.

Equipment

The use of video required the acquisition of equipment. Hatch (2002) warned beginning researchers of the expense and technical expertise necessary for undertaking a project that includes video data. In recent years digital camcorders and video-editing software made for personal home computers have made video production more accessible to people who are not professional filmmakers (Graue & Walsh, 1998). Nonetheless, the equipment required is still costly, especially on the limited budget of a graduate student.

In this study I used digital camcorders, tripods, external microphones, Macintosh laptop computers with movie-editing software, and a television set with a VCR. The classroom I used for our after-school meetings was equipped with the television set and VCR. I brought the rest of the equipment to each session.

Before my study began, I made a special arrangement with the director of the media lab in the education building at the university so that I could borrow equipment for my data collection. Each day before going to my research site I stopped off at the media lab and checked out one digital camcorder and three laptop computers. In the

evening on my way home from my research site I had to rush back to the media lab before it closed so that I could turn in the equipment. This took a great deal of time and was a less than optimal arrangement. However, I had no choice because I could not afford to buy all of the equipment I needed.

Adding to the anxiety of the time necessary for picking up and dropping off the equipment was the constant fear that the lab would not have some of the items I needed on the days I went to pick them up. The media lab had only a limited number of camcorders and laptops. Undergraduates, graduate students, and professors also used the equipment I needed, so I was always worried that when I went to check out cameras and computers none would be available. Fortunately, the media lab director looked out for me and was always able to locate the equipment I needed.

After each session I needed a digital video camera to watch the footage. It took a great deal of time to transcribe and log the videotapes of each session. It was not feasible to borrow a camera from the media lab for this, since I was already pushing my luck borrowing the equipment for each session. I had to purchase a video camera for this. In addition, when my participants began work on their small group film projects they needed access to a camera they could borrow to take home. I had to buy a video camera for this, too.

I ended up purchasing two digital video cameras, two external microphones, and a tripod to supplement the equipment I was borrowing from the university and to allow me the freedom to loan the cameras to my participants for their movie projects. Another hidden expense that is not often mentioned in the literature is the cost of

videocassettes. For each session I had to buy blank videotapes to record our meetings and blank tapes for my participants to use in their movie projects. My recommendation for anyone planning a research project that involves image-based research is to plan carefully for exactly what equipment is necessary and then secure funding so that these expenses are not out of pocket.

Field Notes and Analytic Memos

Hatch (2002) advised using video recording along with, not instead of, other data collection approaches. Although video recording is a powerful tool, it requires specialized technical skill that is beyond the means of most beginning researchers. In addition to video-recorded data gathering, I wrote field notes and analytic memos immediately following each session (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). In the field notes I wrote descriptive narratives of what we did in each session and what I noticed happening. The analytic memos were my reflections about the process and the beginnings of my interpretations of what I was observing. Although the field notes and analytic memos are clearly based on my interpretations and not the voices of my participants, I cross-checked the impressions I was forming with my participants during the course of our after-school sessions. In this way this data were folded back into our group discussions for further discussion.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is not a single stage in the research process (Glesne, 1999). It is important to note that there was not a clear distinction between data gathering and data analysis. Analysis was an ongoing process that began with my first meeting with the participants, continued throughout data collection, and continued after that phase ended (Wolcott, 1995). After each meeting with my participants I wrote field notes and analytic memos and logged and transcribed video for analysis. Coding began as I read my data in an effort to identity emergent concepts and categories in the voices of my participants. Using the various forms of data helped to create a richer and more complex picture (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Weis & Fine, 2000).

Logging Video

Each session with participants was videotaped in addition to the movies made by the participants. When using video as a data source, it is vital to create a system for keeping track of what has been taped (Hatch, 2002). Tapes must be labeled clearly to show the dates, times, settings, and circumstances of each video. Videotapes sitting on a shelf do little to help in the analysis of data because they cannot be spread out on a table, seen as a whole, or written on, as can textual data records. Logging video is a means of making the video data accessible (Graue & Walsh, 1998).

After each session with my participants I logged the videotapes I collected. Graue and Walsh (1998) described the process of logging videotape:

> Logging a tape consists of dividing the tape into short segments using a consistent set of criteria, for example, by activity, by topic, or by actors' entry and exit. Each segment begins with the time recorded on the tape—always use the date and running time option—and has a brief description of what occurs in that segment. …A well-constructed log book makes the tapes accessible and turns the raw data of tapes into part of a data record. (p. 139)

I used the process of logging the videos of our sessions and the participant-made movies to create a textual data record of the activities and topics that I could easily work with and locate on the tapes when I wanted to go back to the video for further review.

Transcribing

In addition to logging the videotapes, I transcribed the audio from them as if they were audiotapes. Graue and Walsh (1998) described this process as "an immense task." I can attest to that. I spent many hours into the night watching and rewinding the videotapes one small segment at a time to get the actual words of my participants as they discussed the various topics in our sessions. Although it was painstaking work, it was important to me to be able to have direct quotes from my participants, so I feel it was worth the effort.

The process of logging and transcribing the videotapes of each session with my participants and of their movies was ongoing. The process started immediately following our first session together. I logged and transcribed each session before our next meeting in order to stay on top of the task. In addition to not feeling behind in my work, this process helped me become more familiar with the data and assisted my

decisions about guiding group sessions. At times this included using excerpts from prior sessions to show and discuss with participants.

Coding and Categorizing

Having hard copies of all of the videotaped logs, transcripts, field notes, and analytic memos helped me to view the data set as a whole. I chose to code by hand rather than using computer software. After reading through the notes many times, I identified categories that emerged from the voices of my participants (Hatch, 2002). I coded the data according to the emerging categories and chunked the data, creating separate files containing all of the data pertaining to each category. Once I chunked the data I reread each file to see if still agreed with the category where I placed it. I moved chunks of data between files on many occasions as I worked reorganizing my data. When I felt satisfied with the categories and the chunks of data in each category, I began the writing process.

Writing served as another level of analysis. As I worked to create an organized narrative that depicted the voices of my participants (and my own voice), I continued to analyze and interpret the data I had gathered (Richardson, 1994). Both writing and the feedback I received on drafts helped me to focus and to make sure my assertions were sufficiently supported in the data.

Representation of Data

As I have stated, it was my intention to design a collaborative study that included a multilayered and polyvocal text. Using videotape as a data source opened up possibilities for alternative forms of representation of data. Part of my original decision to videotape each session and to have participants make movies was to find a means to provide a more honest representation of the participants' voices. I hoped that the videos of the participants would somehow foreground their perspectives and limit my authorial presence. I considered the possibility of creating a multimedia dissertation entirely on DVD with links to raw data. Another possibility was to include all of my meetings with my participants as an appendix on DVD. As it turned out, this was too large of a learning curve for my limited technological skills. Instead, I settled on including a DVD of the participants' movies and a text-based dissertation that includes descriptions and excerpts from the video transcripts.

I chose to represent the data, analysis, and interpretation primarily in narrative text. When writing I took measures to attempt a multilayered and polyvocal account of my research that resists the "desire for totalizing essentialist stories" (Cary, 1999; p. 412) that romanticize voice. These measures include highlighting the process of the research, using block quotes with large chunks of participants' conversations, including vignettes, and using critical reflexivity.

The chapters that follow do not report students' voices by emphasizing only the outcome of my findings. Students' voices are not presented as if they were told to me in a straightforward or direct fashion. I attempted to interrupt the flow of the

product of my findings by including detailed descriptions of the process of how the research was conducted and how the interactions of the participants with each other and with myself contributed to the outcomes of our conversations.

I use block quotes to offset large chunks of participants' conversations from the narrative that includes my analysis and interpretation. Cary (1999) used similar text boxes to complicate some of her earlier work and to highlight a "speak-for-itself text" (p. 412) with pre- and posttext box comments that problematize the assumptions of her past work. My use of quotes was not so sophisticated. However, I did draw on Cary's (1999) use of text boxes or block quotes to attempt to include participants' voices while also highlighting the decontextualized nature of including fragments of conversations. Therefore, it is my hope that the block quotes will serve to remind the readers that they are reading a fragment of a conversation that was "cut" from its original source then "pasted" by me into my interpretive narrative.

Throughout this dissertation are italicized vignettes that relate to the themes presented. The purpose of the italics in these narrative passages is to set them off from the rest of the work. I have tried to write the vignettes in a style that will transport the reader to the place and time when each event occurred. Unlike the block-quoted data, the vignettes are meant to flow for the reader.

Finally, in my narrative write up of this study I have attempted to stay present in the representation by using critical reflexivity (Lather, 1997). I have done this first by stating my positionality. I attempted to state who I am, the influences in my life that led me to this research project, and the ideology that fueled my desire to do such

work. In addition, as I have described, I have used reflexivity by highlighting the process of the research and using the block quotes and italicized vignettes to signal my authorial imposition on students' voices. To further highlight my involvement, I include discussion in chapter 8 that problematizes my methodology and desire to foreground students' voices.

Trustworthiness

Wolcott (1995) argued against the relevance of validity as a criterion measure in qualitative research. However, this does not mean that qualitative researchers need not be concerned with issues typically related to the construct of validity. The credibility of my findings depends upon how well I have established trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I address five measures I have taken in this study in pursuit of trustworthiness.

1. First, I have already discussed my attempts to write with critical reflexivity. Being reflexive by stating your researcher biases and discussing how you will monitor such bias in your research is one measure to promote trustworthiness (Glesne, 1999). I have attempted to be quite explicit about this throughout this study.

2. I believe that my long-standing relationship with the participants and the significant time that I spent with them during the study contribute to the trustworthiness of this research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to prolonged engagement to imply an appropriate amount of time to develop trust with participants, learn the culture, and check out hunches. Having known my participants for upwards

of 6 years at the time of the study, I hope to be justified when claiming "prolonged engagement."

3. Throughout the study and in the representation I used various forms of data as triangulation. My observations, the participant-made films, the conversations of the participants, and relevant literature worked together to help create a richer and more complex picture of my findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Weis & Fine, 2000).

4. As I began to analyze data I used member checking to try to make sure I was interpreting the ideas of my participants accurately (Glesne, 1999). Although I was not able to have participants review the data chapters or the implications chapter, I did solicit their feedback in another way. Part of my reasons for playing back segments of their previous conversations during our after-school sessions was to clarify their words and to dig deeper on various topics.

5. Finally, I hope that the narrative representation of this research along with the DVD of the participant-made movies will provide rich, thick description that allows readers to feel as if they are entering the research context (Glesne, 1999). Although the narrative was not designed to flow with ease of understanding, I hope to have achieved verisimilitude by putting together a story that is a little messy, like life itself.

Leaving the Field

Corrine Glesne (1999) wrote, "Leaving the field may be a bittersweet time" (p. 66). I had mixed feelings when the time came to pack up my things and leave Live

Oak. On one hand, I was excited to dive deeper into my data and really devote time figuring out how to make sense of the whole experience and plan how I would represent my findings. On the other, I was leaving my former students potentially for the last time. These were kids whom I had seen grow up from tiny 8-year-olds to their current state of young adolescents. I had no assurances that I would be able to keep in touch with these children whom I had grown to care about deeply over the years. In the coming year after my data collection they would be spreading out over the city to many area high schools, and in all likelihood I would loose touch with them.

In terms of data collection the exit was very smooth. Before starting our after-school sessions I determined the end date for the project to be at Spring Break. The students were mentally prepared for this, and with the exception of Beth, all of the groups finished their movie projects in time for our last session. Then we had a party and shared their movies over pizza with some of their former elementary school teachers.

By the time the sessions ended I felt saturated, meaning I had enough data and did not have room in my head to accommodate more information. I also got the feeling that my participants were ready to end their participation and move on to other things. The only participant who expressed grief about the ending of our group meetings was DeAndre. This caused me some mental anguish because he was perhaps the one participant who was most in need of constructive activities outside of school, and I really enjoyed working with him. Although there were only a few more

weeks left in the school year at this point, I still felt like I was letting him down when I sat with him to explain that I could not extend the after-school schedule.

Chapter 4

The Student-Made Movies

The purpose of this mini-chapter is to describe each of the student-made movies that were created by the participants in this study. I present each movie here without much analysis. The analysis comes in the chapters that follow along with the commentary by the filmmakers and the other participants' reactions to the movies.

Four movies are described in this chapter. Three movies were taken to completion. They were (a) *Groups in our School,* (b) *A Day at School,* and (c) *Yu-Gi-Oh News Day.* The fourth movie, *Does Freedom Exist?* was never finished by the student filmmaker but is reviewed in brief based on the parts that were filmed.

Groups in Our School

This movie is the result of a cooperative effort by Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline. The three girls decided early in our after-school sessions to make a movie based on the social scene at Live Oak. The girls did not explicitly state this, but I saw race and ethnicity as an issue in this film. When they introduced the film they described it as a simple representation of the varying social groups at their school. Although they make no mention of race or ethnicity, it immediately becomes apparent that the children group themselves along these lines. The film does not offer analysis for why this happens. Although the issue is only hinted at by the images and titles for each

group, the movie sparked conversation around issues of race and ethnicity when the participants viewed it.

When the movie opens, letters rise from the bottom of a black screen to the beat of techno music. They come together to reveal the title, "Groups in Our School." They quickly disappear and cut to many children eating in a noisy cafeteria. The movie moves quickly to the beat of the music. As the camera pans throughout the cafeteria the soundtrack has the sounds of children mixing with the word "renegade" repeating over and over.

Each scene is prefaced by a title that gives the name of a social group the pictures are supposed to represent. The first group, called "The Jocks," shows confident and jovial Latino boys with crew cuts. Seconds later, without explanation, the scene changes. The title reveals that the next group is "The Cool People." At this table sits a group of African American boys and girls. They do not pay much attention to the camera that is recording them. The scenes shift with only the titles to guide the viewer. "The Mixed Group" are all girls. They are mostly Latina but include one Indian girl, a White girl, and an African American girl in the mix. Moving along the camera shows a group called "The Others." This group has boys and girls sitting segregated by gender at two tables that are next to each other. They are all Latino except for one girl who is African American. Seconds later we are introduced to the group called "The Whites." They are made up of a boy who commands the attention of four girls. We are then transported to another table and shown a group titled "The Mexicans." They are all boys and laugh as they give the finger to the camera. After

this we are shown "The Geeks and Nerds." They are a small group of White and Latino boys. Over the music you can hear Sonia making fun of them: "Look at them chomping their food," she says. At this you cannot help but feel the pain of the meanness of children in middle school. For a split second the camera shows "The Band and Orchestra Freaks" as they sit in a hallway waiting for practice. The group called "The Skateboarders" consists of only two boys standing in the courtyard.

At this point the movie seems to shift. Instead of continuing with groups at school the camera begins to focus on individual children. This half of the movie contains an interview with some kids in the hall, some footage of kids filing back into the school after an apparent fight, and a shot titled "Our Favorite Janitor" that features a middle-aged man striking a funny pose. Finally, we are shown two boys walking down a hallway; the title reads, "Double Matt." They give karate kicks and the movie ends.

A Day at School

Bernice, Thalía, and Griselda worked together to make a movie that takes the viewers through a school day at Live Oak. According to Thalía, "It shows how the students' character changes depending on the environment." Though they did not use these words, it seems they were trying to juxtapose active learning and passive learning. Interestingly, each scene that depicts active students is a shot from an elective course, and each of the passive ones is from a core academic area. Similar to the movie about school groups, these filmmakers did not choose to use voice-over or

any other technique to make explicit their analysis of the situation. Instead they created images simply to represent what they considered to be a typical day at school.

The movie begins with the voice of Thalía, a popular Mexican singer, singing a song called "*A Quien le Importa*." According to Bernice, this song represents the teenage spirit and is therefore the perfect song for this movie. After viewing the movie in Session 16 Bernice commented,

> Because it is a typical day in school and the song says, "I don't care what other people think about me. I am just the way I am and I don't give a 'blank'—you know—what they say." That's why I picked that song. Because that movie, it's a teenage movie you know, and I think that's how teenagers think. People my age.

The opening scene of the movie shows a math class. The students are sitting down at desks and opening their notebooks. The teacher has a computer hooked up to a projector for the students to view her work. Next the film cuts to "History" and shows rows of desks facing the front of the room and students either sitting or walking to the front towards the teacher. From history the viewer is taken to Latin American Studies and immediately sees the obvious contrast from the two classrooms shown before it. In this class the teacher is standing with a student showing him how to dance salsa. She solicits more volunteers and gets a chorus of laughter. Next the film shows band. Here each of the students has an instrument and sheet music. The teacher also has an instrument and is demonstrating a technique as students practice it.

Now that we have had a view into some typical classes, the moviemakers put two questions on the screen: (a) "What do you think about school?" and (b) "What

might teachers do to make school better?" As if to answer these questions, the movie cuts to an interview with a boy in the cafeteria. He is asked what he thinks about school; his reply is that it is boring. He concludes that the teachers make it boring and it would be better if students were allowed to be with their friends and work in groups. The movie cuts to a brief shot of a student doing homework in the cafeteria and then another skipping through the hall. The final scene of the movie shows French class where the teacher and students are sitting in a circle outside practicing speaking French.

Yu-Gi-Oh News Day

This movie was the joint effort of DeAndre, Tony, Joe, and Fransisco. The boys initially had trouble picking topics for a movie. After dabbling in a few ideas and each attempting to make individual movies, they grouped together to make one about a common interest: a card game called Yu-Gi-Oh. Once they chose this topic they took it very seriously. They worked together to plan, write scripts, shoot, and edit with a great sense of purpose and profound determination.

The boys styled their movie after a daily news program. The movie starts with the music and intro of the Yu-Gi-Oh cartoon that comes on television and then cuts to a mock news show. The focus of this video is to teach viewers about the game of Yu-Gi-Oh and how to play it. The boys take turns acting as newscasters explaining the details of the cards and strategies for the game. Once all of the rules and strategies are

explained, the program gives a demonstration of the game. This is done as if two of the newscasters were arguing and decided to settle their dispute with a duel.

In a sense this movie was a "mockumentary" because the moviemakers used documentary style and a real subject to create a fictional work. The video skillfully moves from part to whole as the boys teach viewers about their topic. Each segment of the movie is informative, although they created a fictional narrative to tie the "show" together.

Does Freedom Exist?

Beth worked by herself to make this movie about her quest for an answer to the question in the title. Although she never finished editing the movie, she shot all of the scenes, consisting of an introduction and interviews with a variety of adults. At the end of the after-school sessions Beth reported feeling happy she pursued the topic, even though she never finished. She claimed she found what she was looking for. By talking to many people from diverse backgrounds she concluded that people have different ideas about what freedom means. Before she started on her movie project she took her freedom for granted, but in the end she felt that the closest thing to freedom is life in the United States.

In the footage Beth shot for the introduction to her movie she explains how she got the idea for the project and says, "I don't know what freedom is. This is what I want to know." To find the answer to her question Beth interviewed eight different adults. She was careful to achieve balance in gender, choosing four men and four

women. In addition she sought ethnic diversity by interviewing Asian and Asian American adults as well as Whites. The interviews were long, however, and she was unable to edit the footage to her satisfaction.

Use of the Student-Made Films

I used these films to identify the central themes that are explored in the chapters that follow. In this section I outline the ways I incorporated the films into the data set as a way to explore themes of students' voices.

The student-made films were used in two ways. I looked at the content of each film and the process of each group as the students made their film to develop categories that emerged. In this way, the students' selection of topics and their treatment of their chosen topic assisted in the generation of the themes for this study. For example, the films *A Day at School* and *Does Freedom Exist?* deal with the theme of freedom. One looks at freedom, and lack of freedom, students feel at school. The other looks at a broader construct of societal freedom. In chapter 5 I discuss both films in relation to their respective focuses but also try to show how the participants' ideas on the two types of freedom are interwoven as they are played out in their daily lives and understandings of the world.

In addition to analyzing the content of the films, I looked at data that stemmed from the conversations of participants after viewing each film. In the case of *A Day at School*, the film sparked a great deal of discussion about the nature of learning and the feelings of overwhelming teacher domination felt by many of the participants.

This feeling was not true for all of the participants; the film caused Beth to react by disagreeing with the filmmakers' depiction of a typical day in school. Her reaction not only to the premise of the film but also to the way information was presented shed light on her contextual experience.

Chapter 6 deals with my participants' thoughts on race and ethnicity. Although the makers of the movie *Groups in our School* did not claim explicitly that their movie was intended to address these themes, I saw these themes present in the movie. The conversations of participants after viewing this movie also served to highlight issues of race and ethnicity in schooling and in society.

Chapter 7 contains discussion of the movie *Yu-Gi-Oh News Day.* Both the content of the movie and the story of its creation serve to highlight the theme of outlets in students' lives. Particular attention is paid to DeAndre's experiences both inside and outside of school in relation to the importance of outlets.

In different ways, all four movies, and the discussions of participants after viewing them, related a common message that school is not meeting students' needs. This thread runs through chapters 5, 6, and 7 as each theme is discussed and is revisited in chapter 9 when I discuss the implications of the findings.

Chapter 5

Freedom

The only freedom that is of enduring importance is freedom of intelligence, that is to say, freedom of observation and of judgment exercised in behalf of purposes that are intrinsically worthwhile. – John Dewey in *Experience and Education*

John Dewey (1938, p. 61) meant that freedom must be more than the external freedom of movement; it also must encompass intellectual and moral freedom. Similarly Kohl (1969) lamented, "Students everywhere are deprived of the right to make choices concerning their own destinies" (p. 12). Like Dewey and Kohl, the participants in my study considered questions about freedom in relation to their school experiences. This chapter looks at students' perceptions of the freedom and the lack of freedom and agency they feel at school. The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first part focuses on students' views of what I call pedagogical freedom. This deals with issues of student-centered versus teacher-centered pedagogy. The second section looks at societal freedom. This is a broader issue that involves hegemony and its interplay with students' experiences and perceptions of schooling. The third section discusses both types of freedom.

Pedagogical Freedom

What might teachers do to make school better?
Do hands-on activities. Not like, "Do this worksheet. Do this."
-Joe answering a question from the movie *A Day at School*

Lack of Freedom/Lack of Agency

My participants expressed the view that teachers were the ones with the power to make school interesting or boring. The result, according to my participants, is usually that school is boring and unconnected to the interests of students. The disempowerment felt by my participants in terms of self-determination in curricular matters was clearly highlighted when three girls embarked on a project to make a movie about a typical day at school.

Thalía briefly explained the plan she devised with Griselda and Bernice:

> Ok, we thought, our idea is, ok, *esta es nuestra idea, no se si ud se apoya*? *Pero pensamos en grabar como pocquito tiempo en la mañana como los estudiantes actuan, y luego cambiamos a first period y poner como the environment*—how the environment changes and how the students' character and attitude changes with it. …So we decided to take like a little bit, like 2 minutes or some seconds of every class.

The three girls had a plan to film just "2 minutes or some seconds of every class" and to illustrate, as the title of the movie suggests, a day at school. As Thalía explained, the girls did not feel they would need a lot of footage to show how students' "character and attitude changes" with the different classroom environments, thus depicting a typical day at school.

It is ironic, and quite telling, that perhaps the strongest example of the disempowerment felt by students in the teacher-centered environment of school came out of these three girls' efforts to film a typical day. The following vignette recounts an episode that transpired when the girls began work on their movie project. It illustrates how students' efforts at self-determination in adult-centered environments

are perceived as threatening and are thwarted even by teachers who consider themselves constructivists.

Students' Voices About School

I arrived at Live Oak on a Friday afternoon just minutes before the bell for C lunch. Bernice, Thalía, and Griselda borrowed my camera a couple of days before to begin filming their project about a typical day in school. We arranged to meet at lunch so I could pick up the camera. I positioned myself in the hallway outside the cafeteria so I could watch for the girls without getting caught in the stampede of students entering the cafeteria.

When the bell sounded I watched as the frontrunners came firing through the doors of the courtyard to be first in line for food. As usual, Tony and Joe were a close second and third. "Hi, Mr. Gainer," I heard as they blazed by without slowing their pace. After the lead pack there was a lull before waves of boys and girls came moseying in grouped in threes and fours chatting about the current events in their daily lives. Walking up with a small group of girls, Sonia and Jaqueline noticed me and stopped. "Are you here to talk to Thalía and Bernice?" Sonia asked with a knowing look.

"Yes, have you seen them?"

Sonia's voice rang with the excitement of fresh gossip, "Yeah, they got in trouble and it was bad, Mr."

"Did it have anything to do with my camera?" My heart sank.

"Yeah, I'll let them tell you about it though," Sonia said with a smile. They skipped off as quickly as they appeared, leaving me dangling amid swarms of students pressing to enter the small opening leading to the lunch line. Minutes felt like eternity as I waited speculating what could have happened, imagining the worst. My mind raced with endless possibilities. Did they film without permission and have the camera confiscated by a teacher? Was the camera stolen or broken? Were they being silly with the camera, causing a disruption in class and leading to notification of the principal? How would I explain this as I begged to be allowed to continue my research at the school? I wondered what I would do if this incident resulted in my being kicked out of my research site. I trusted these girls with expensive equipment and a sensitive situation; now my worst fear was that they somehow messed up. All of my imagined scenarios placed blame for this nebulous "trouble" on the girls and made me feel powerless.

Finally, after the droves of lunch goers were already inside the cafeteria, Bernice and Thalía trudged in bringing up the rear. When they saw me their shoulders hunched and sheepish expressions covered their faces. "How are you?" I asked, as the girls reluctantly grew closer.

"Muy mal," were the only words Bernice could muster.

"I heard you got in trouble. I want to hear the whole story."

"We should sit down first, because this will take awhile." So we went inside and they got in line to buy their lunches. I waited for them, a bundle of nerves

anxiously waiting to hear their story—one that I felt would certainly have implications for my research and my tenuous welcome at Live Oak.

As I waited for the girls to emerge from the lunch line I took in my surroundings; it was a normal day in the cafeteria. The gigantic cinderblock room illuminated by fluorescent lighting was brimming with life. I find it amazing that such a drab institutional space can harbor such vibrancy. The students shed their lethargic classroom exoskeletons. No longer the insolent teenagers of a few minutes past uttering monosyllabic responses to teachers' questions from behind wooden desks, they metamorphosed into teenage social butterflies, milling about, flitting from table to table, finding friends, laughing and joking. It is as if they check their bored and defiant exteriors when they cross the threshold of the double blue doors that lead into the eatery.

The girls exited the lunch line together and signaled me to follow. We squeezed through the long narrow aisles of dining tables overflowing with young people, a sea of hooded sweatshirts, the current unofficial uniform of adolescence. Though I was distracted with my worries, I caught bits and pieces of conversations as we passed the groups of young people recounting the daily horrors and elations of being 14. Boys and girls grouped in clusters were leaning over their trays and shouting over the constant buzz. They laughed and taunted from group to group. "Is Eric still going out with Tina?" asked a girl with long black hair and a Chicago Bulls jersey hanging loosely over her skinny frame. A boy with a hood pulled over his buzz-cut hair and a gold chain strategically draped outside his shirt replied, "He broke up

with her yesterday." His buddies, with the same outfit and same haircut, smiled and nodded their heads, seemingly proud to be in the company of this boy who so adeptly traverses the shark-infested waters of gender relations.

I followed as Bernice and Thalía walked with their backs straight to balance the hamburgers and fries on the hard plastic trays with the counterweight of overstuffed backpacks. Like tightrope walkers at a carnival they skillfully weaved between boys and girls too large for the plastic chairs on which they were perched. Bernice and Thalía seemed unfazed at the peril that at any given moment one of these unpredictable teenagers could burst up from a seat and send their trays flying, leaving them dripping with ketchup and chocolate milk. They smiled and said hello to a number of these land mines as we searched for three chairs of our own.

The cafeteria is an atmosphere that makes me feel uncomfortable. To me this mass of pubescent bodies seems volatile and wild. I feel out of place, awkward and embarrassed. As an adult I am an unwanted intrusion and a spectacle. The other adults in the room are teachers and administrators. They stand physically at the margins with their walkie-talkies and stern expressions. I get the feeling they feel a similar discomfort. They rarely interact with the students, and when they do it is a quick bark of, "Stop running" or "José, sit down now," and then they quickly retreat to their post on the periphery of the action.

Although the commotion made me feel nervous and out of place, this did not seem to be the case for the girls. They seemed relaxed and quite at ease amid what felt to me like a hormone-raging powder keg. The cafeteria is young people's

territory. It is a liberated zone in the belly of an adult-centered beast, and for the moment I was allowed through the space like an embedded reporter with a guerilla army being led through a jungle path to a clandestine encampment where I would be granted a short interview away from the dangers of the government army. We were in a place where the environment put me as the interviewer in a somewhat less powerful/advantaged position.

At the end of the row we found some open space and sat. Around us the cafeteria continued to swirl with activity. The blur of hooded sweat shirts and jeans and the sounds of laughter and flirting became a shield, not interrupting but providing us with cover, giving the girls the safety they needed to allow their dangerous discourse to unfold. Now the girls were ready to talk about the bad experience with my camera.

I sat and listened as Bernice did most of the talking and Thalía nodded her head in agreement, occasionally offering words to augment the story. "We asked if we could film for like 2 minutes of Mr. Fauker's class and he told us we could," Bernice was noticeably angry as she recapped what had happened the previous day. They filmed for 2 minutes of their Language Arts class. When the period was over, their teacher, Mr. Fauker, told them that he did not want them to use the footage in their movie. He told them he wanted them to delete it because, according to the girls, he was unhappy with the behavior of the class. "We told him it was easy to delete it when we put it in iMovie [the editing software]. But then he got mad and told Bernice to give him the camera," Thalía pleaded.

"He yelled at us and Thalía started crying," Bernice added with disdain. She explained that she did not want to give him the camera because she had promised me she would not allow anyone else to touch it. Besides, they had footage taken in other classes that they did not want to risk losing. "Then he took the camera from me and deleted what we filmed." Bernice's words were etched with the tone of someone who had been wronged. Her eyes narrowed and she was indignant as she remembered the way this man physically removed the camera from her hands. My mouth must have been hanging open at this point. I was at a loss for words, unable to imagine that a teacher could not only not trust these two girls but also treat them in such a disrespectful way. Bernice must have read my incredulous expression because she thrust the camera at me and said, "Listen to it. It's all right here."

What Mr. Fauker had done to delete their footage was rewind the tape, put the lens cap on the camera, and press record. He may not have realized that the camera recorded his voice for the next 2 minutes as he berated the girls for filming in his class. I will not use what he said in my paper, but the tape of his angry words corroborated the girls' story.

Shaking her head in disgust Bernice said, "I did not expect that from him. But he has been like that all year." Bernice had him in sixth grade and must have had a different impression of him that year. "He said that that's not what his class is like, but it is what it's like, Mr." She was referring to his objection to their filming him lecturing to a misbehaving class.

"And he told us we could film before we started," Thalía reminded us, accentuating the fact that they felt unjustly treated.

The two girls seemed to have reacted to the confrontation in different ways. Bernice was angry. Thalía, on the other hand, was not so talkative. She seemed withdrawn and slightly shook up by the experience. She nodded her agreement with Bernice's retelling but did not do much talking. She looked worried and embarrassed. "You did not do anything wrong. I will talk to Mr. Fauker and everything will work out," I tried to reassure them in a calm voice, though underneath my blood was boiling. Thalía gave me a halfhearted nod. It was one thing for me to get angry, but it was the girls who would have to sit in this class for the rest of the year. I worried that I was responsible for this fiasco. "I guess it is hard to capture what school is really like. You may try, and someone with another idea can censor you," I summed up.

"Exactly," replied Bernice shaking her head.

The bell rang marking the end of lunch period. The girls gathered their things and set off for their next classes. I accompanied them to the hall and stood watching as they filed into classrooms with the rest of their peers. When in the presence of the girls I felt the need to show a calm exterior. They knew I was upset and saw my frustration at the situation, but I also wanted to communicate to them that they need not worry more about this issue. Now alone in the hallway I felt free to allow my anger to bubble to the surface.

When I read about teachers acting in authoritarian ways it makes me upset, and I wonder why school is sometimes so unfair. However, when I experienced two of

my students' reactions to a teacher's treating them in such a way, upset is not sufficient to describe my indignation. My blood was boiling and I was ready to explode. These were not just any teenagers being scolded. It was Bernice and Thalía, whom I have known since they were 8 years old. I have watched them grow up. From outward appearance they may not look exactly like Bernice with the blue-and-white icing smeared all over her face during her 9th birthday party and Thalía, at 8, gasping for breaths between sentences as she eagerly recounted all of the twists of the current running telenovela, but they still are these lovely people. I could not bear to see them hurt by a bullying teacher. I wanted to protect them and make sure that this did not happen again.

I walked down the hall, fists clenched, towards the room of Mr. Fauker. With each step I fantasized my fists landing solidly across his face. A tape was looping through my head of him berating the girls. I kept thinking how unbelievably unfair and what an abuse of his power this was. He must have felt powerful as he humiliated Thalía and she started crying in front of him. I imagined my fists continuously pounding on his fleshy pink cheeks. I wanted to make him pay by leaving him at the scene of his crime lying in a pool of blood, with soiled pants and sucking for air through broken teeth.

About 10 steps down the hall I began to experience another sensation, that of reason. I imagined what would happen if I confronted this teacher while this angry and the impact it would have on my project and the girls' future experiences in his class. I was nothing but an outsider to the teachers and administrators at this school.

At the first instance of making waves they would not hesitate to send me packing. I realized that I did not need to be a martyr, and if I confronted this teacher in my present state nothing good would come of it. Unsure what to do, I turned around and slowly walked to my truck. I needed to leave the campus to cool off.

Although this story could not be included in their film, it may be the best example of the disempowerment of students experienced by the type of teacher-centered atmospheres that partly inspired the film in the first place. McDaniel, Necochea, Rios, Stowell, and Kritzer (2001) pointed out that middle school students are stepping into the adult world, and they are interested in incongruities between what adults say and do. Teachers can work with this interest or against it:

> While middle level students are keen to question the contradictions they see between what adults say they value and how they actually behave, our response to their identification of these contradictions can either foster greater critical thinking or suppress it. (p. 58)

When the teacher physically removed the camera from Bernice's hands and censored the footage from his class, it was a strong reminder of the unequal power between students and teachers in school. The students may have had permission to film, but ultimately when the teacher did not like the message he exercised his total control and snuffed it out. Furthermore, he did not trust the girls to delete it themselves as they said they would. Interestingly, the teacher objected to the fact that they captured film of him lecturing to a misbehaving class. He obviously views himself as more constructivist than that and did not want to be represented as an authoritarian, teacher-centered type of teacher. As current students in his class the

girls were in no position to argue with him about this point, though they clearly disagreed with him when they retold the story to me. It is ironic that he used extremely authoritarian measures to silence the girls' possible message that his class is teacher-centered, something he perceived to be untrue.

The message to Thalía and Bernice was that their attempts at self-determination in school would only be permitted when aligned with their teachers' opinions. They do not have freedom to express their perceptions of school because ultimately they do not have the power. Since the teacher in this example did not like what he perceived to be the girls' message, he censored it with no attempt at dialogue. Bernice and Thalía learned that at school they exist in an adult-centered environment where there is not a level playing field.

Pleasantville?

When teachers dominate and students feel a lack of agency and freedom in terms of curriculum, school is not an intellectually engaging place (Cummins, 1986/2001). This banking model (Freire, 1970) casts teachers as experts and students as passive followers asked to regurgitate answers to questions the teacher already knows. This model has no room for students to question the nature of their experience; if they do, they are silenced as was demonstrated to Thalía and Bernice in the preceding example. The silencing functions to reinforce the status quo of teacher–student relationships. This dynamic was further explored when, in Session 8, my

participants viewed and discussed scenes from Hollywood movies that dealt with schooling.

Bernice likened a scene in a movie to the teacher-student relationship in typical classrooms she has experienced. We viewed a scene from the movie *Pleasantville* that takes place in a high school classroom. The name of the town, and the movie, suggest a place that is calm and inhabited by complacent and happy people. The movie is set in the 1950s and the scene is in black and white. This, along with the classroom arrangement, all White students who sit at desks in rows and face the teacher, conjure up an image of media from that era. The students act in exaggeratedly "good" behavior by sitting quietly, listening to the teacher, and raising their hands to speak only to answer the teacher's questions. The lesson is a simple geography lesson about the students' neighborhood. When one girl, who seems different from the rest of the class only because she has a puzzled expression on her face, asks about what is on the other side of Main Street, the teacher and other students get noticeably upset. The girl is treated like she asked a ridiculous question. Why should she want to know about anything different or alien? The name of the movie, *Pleasantville*, suggests an irony, because it is not so pleasant when someone deviates from the "official script" as mandated by the teacher.

Most of my participants agreed that the scene is pretty ridiculous, and Joe wondered why anyone would make a movie like that. Tony and DeAndre thought at least a few people should have disrupted the class or bullied other kids. Bernice had

another take on the scene. Rather then viewing it as ridiculous, Bernice thought the scene was realistic. Her explanation revealed a lot about her frustrations with school.

> Bernice: You know how there's this girl who asks like a smart question, because I think that's like a smart question.
> Me: Yes
> Bernice: Well, I think that's kind of realistic because there is always the person who—
> DeAndre: Is curious?
> Bernice: No. There is always the person who is smart. Because she was the smart one in that movie. They wanted to make the dude who answered the question to be the smart one, but he wasn't smart, 'cause that was easy.
> Me: What did he say?
> Bernice: What was the difference between Main Street and Elm Street?
> Me: Right. That's a really good point.
> Bernice: That just made him seem really stupid.
> Me: Right, the teacher was fishing for one right answer.
> Bernice: And you know how the girl was asking the question, what's outside of—
> Me: Yeah, "What's outside of Main Street?"
> Bernice: You know how the teacher didn't want to—they were like surprised, you know. And sometimes teachers do that, like they just ignore you when they don't know the answer. They don't want to say they don't know the answer, so they just ignore you.

When Bernice commented on the scene from the movie she spoke in a tone of someone who was insulted. She stated that the girl who asked the question, "What's outside of Main Street?" was the smart one but was treated by the teacher as if she was silly for even asking this question. Instead, the teacher construed the boy who answered according to the teacher's script to be smart. Bernice claimed this was easy and pointed to her own experience with teachers who ignore students who ask difficult questions. Bernice was insulted because she has had her inquiry silenced by an authoritarian teacher.

There are parallels between the experience of Bernice and Thalía when they were censored and the experience of the girl in the movie. Instead of "What's outside of Main Street?" Bernice and Thalía asked, "What is a typical day at our school?" Similar to the movie, the girls were being genuinely inquisitive about their surroundings. In both cases teachers met their acts of inquiry with opposition. Similar to the movie, the question of Bernice and Thalía was not sanctioned by the teacher, and he apparently felt threatened by the potential answer. However, unlike the movie and contrary to Bernice's comparison, in this case the teacher did not ignore them but found another way to use his authority to thwart their inquiry: He deleted their footage. In both cases the inquisitive students were silenced.

Bernice was critiquing the traditional role of teacher as expert. Her comments showed her frustration with classes that reward students for not being inquisitive. Steinberg and Kincheloe (1998) stated that in traditional school settings "students are taught to surrender themselves to the system and become passive recipients of official truths" (p. 13). I think Bernice would agree that schools attempt to put students in this role, and she was insulted by the mandate. However, rather than surrender herself to the system she struggles against it. She is clearly inquisitive and quite a critical thinker; she took a scene from a movie that was made to caricature the style of media in the 1950s that was not realistic. She interpreted and explained how it was indeed realistic, a perspective I doubt even the filmmakers had considered. Her facility for divergent thinking in the face of a school atmosphere that attempts to deny students the right to be inquisitive is reminiscent of Herbert Kohl's (1994) notion of "creative

maladjustment." Although she struggles to remain a critical thinker, she seems to be fighting an uphill battle.

School Is Boring 'Cause Teachers Make it Boring

> Thirteen year olds are often "bored," but their outward indifference is driven by what they perceive as the inability of adults to see them as capable young people. "Bored" translates as "insulted." This is not the "scared/bored" of the eight year old, but the challenging "bored" of the adolescent desperately seeking an identity and wanting grown-ups to both notice and leave them alone at the same time. Students at this age who complain that their teachers are "boring" are clearly indicating their perception that they are not being seen, recognized or acknowledged as individuals in the classroom. (Wood, 1997, p. 147)

In the preceding quote, the words "thirteen year olds" could be substituted with "early adolescents." Anyone who has spent time with middle school age children and asked them about school is certainly familiar with the pat response: "It's boring." Adults may feel frustrated by the apparent lack of specificity in the response by young people. However, it is important to consider that children at this age are still figuring out their positions in the world and so may not have fully developed answers for what they are feeling. It is worth taking a closer look at what is meant by "boring" in an attempt to better understand how adolescents interpret their experiences at school.

In their movie *A Day at School*, Thalía and Bernice interviewed a boy about his opinions of school. This interview is positioned as the centerpiece of their movie, and although not explicitly stated it seems to function as representative of what students think of school. In fact, when talking about the movie Bernice commented that she felt this boy really hit the nail on the head. When I initially viewed the movie

it seemed to me that this boy had little to say. He thinks school is boring and that kids should have more time with their friends. The more Thalía and Bernice pressed him to be specific, the less he actually said. The following segment of transcript is the interview conducted by Bernice and Thalía with the boy as it appears in their movie:

> Boy: I think school is boring. (Girls laugh) It is! I'm being honest at least.
> Bernice: Why?
> Boy: 'Cause, 'cause the teachers make it boring. I think they should make it more fun.
> Bernice: How? In what ways?
> Boy: I don't know. They just should.
> Thalía: Why do you think all of your classes are boring?
> Boy: I already said it.
> Thalía: Why?
> Boy: 'Cause it's boring. It is. The teachers don't make it fun enough.
> Bernice: What do they need to do to make it funner?
> Boy: I don't know. Make funner activities.
> Bernice: I don't know, like take quizzes or something?
> Boy: Quizzes, no. They should make it like in a group. Where you can talk to your friends and you won't have to be separate without them.
> Bernice: What's your favorite subject? Math?
> Boy: I don't know what's my favorite subject. (Pause) PE.
> Bernice: What's your favorite sport?
> Boy: Soccer.
> Bernice: Do you play it in school?
> Boy: Yeah.
> Bernice: Do you play it at home?
> Boy: Yeah.
> Bernice: Thalía, help me out. Thalía, ask a question.
> Thalía: What other things do you like about school?
> Boy: I don't know.
> Bernice: Thank you for your time.
> Boy: For your waste of time.

The boy's statements may seem like a very superficial analysis of school. I find it alarming that this boy, who is a magnet student, does not have more to say than "school is boring" and "teachers don't make it fun enough." This does not tell a lot;

however, what he does not say is also significant. Academics are not a blip on the radar for him. His favorite subject is physical education, and he has nothing specific to say about anything else in his school experience. There is a sense that he is so disengaged at school that he does not have a thing to offer for constructive criticism.

The entire responsibility for making school interesting and engaging is placed on the teachers. The boy said, "School is boring…'cause teachers make it boring." The girls asked the question, "What could teachers do to make school better?" This question alone signaled a lack of agency on the part of the filmmakers. His answer was that teachers should "make funner activities." Though the girls in the interview tried to push for specifics, he was unable to produce any. Could it be that he has no relevant background experience in school from which to draw to answer this question? Or perhaps is he so alienated with school that he cannot imagine any way academics could be fun and engaging? When the girls pressed for an answer, the only thing he offered was that he would like to be able to talk more with his friends. Although he was only semiserious with this answer, his feeling about socializing being the most engaging aspect of school is shared by my participants and a commonly held view of early adolescents (Perry, 2002).

Why is it only the teachers' responsibility to make school better? What should the role of the students be? Judging from their questioning and from the fact that they included this interview as the central feature of their video, it seems that the filmmakers share the boy's view that they are powerless to change the structures of school. Although their lives are affected by how it is run, they do not question

seriously what they could do to make school more interesting and engaging. They do not have agency in this matter because for the most part they are put in the role of passive recipients of information. In teacher-centered instruction boredom is the norm, and the children do not feel power over their experience. It is clear to them that the teachers carry the power over curriculum. In effect, school is being done on them. The boy seemed to realize this and responded to Bernice's "Thank you for you time" by adding "for your waste of time." His final words could function as the summary statement of his perception of school; overall it is a waste of time.

After watching this movie with my participants I asked them to comment on the interview with the boy. Joe connected personally with one of his statements. He agreed that PE was a good class, but beyond that "school kind of sucks." His reasoning was that teachers do not make it interesting for students.

> Me: Remember when they interviewed that boy?
> Joe: Yeah. Well my favorite subject is PE. School kind of sucks most of the part. Like sometimes they don't make it exciting for us. They just do nothing but boring homework. No fun activities where we can actually do something. Not like science. Like in my science class we get to actually do experiments and stuff. But last year I didn't get to do that much experiments.
> DeAndre: When you are at school you are never here to have fun. You are never here to have fun. You are here to learn and all that. So you know that's what I think.
> Tony: But for a kid to learn you have to have fun—you have to be able to have fun learning.

Joe's comments corroborated the opinions of the boy in the video but were more explicit about the types of activities that are boring and the few that can be engaging. In Joe's opinion school is boring when students are asked to do activities

that are not connected to authentic purposes and seem like busywork, like his example of "boring homework." However, school can be engaging when students "can actually do something." For Joe this is true in PE where they play sports, but it also can be true in core academic areas like science where they can engage in hands-on activities like experiments. A lot depends on the teacher; as Joe pointed out, this year science was engaging but that had not always been the case.

DeAndre's response to Joe's statement is interesting. He claimed, "You are never here to have fun." DeAndre separates learning and fun; school is a place for learning, and therefore fun is irrelevant. This view is reflective of very traditional schooling and would include a transmission style of instruction that favors efficient delivery of content with little regard for the students' interests. Perhaps it is not surprising that DeAndre would arrive at this conclusion, since he has spent the bulk of his school career in self-contained, special education classrooms where basic skills are emphasized over higher level, open-ended types of experiences (Cummins, 1986/2001).

Tony voiced a more progressive view on learning, stating that he believes that children cannot learn if they are not having fun. For Tony, fun is equated with engagement and is vital for the success of the student. His views are more aligned with constructivist theorists' views on learning (e.g., Piaget, Vygotsky). In fact, most current research on learning is aligned with Tony's perspective (Pitton, 2001).

Although Bernice and Thalía agreed with the overall statement of the boy in the film that school is boring, they disagreed with him and Joe about PE being one

class that is fun. However, Bernice, the captain of the girl's soccer team, is an avid athlete. She pointed out that even in a class like PE, which seems to lend itself to authentic experiences (e.g., playing a sport), the teacher's agenda prevails, and instruction becomes skill and drill.

> Bernice: The only class that's actually fun is PE. Well, no, I take that back. That's the boy.
> Me: You don't like PE?
> Bernice: No. They make you dress out and you don't do anything. You don't even do anything.
> Thalía: You have 10 minutes to dress out and 10 minutes to change. So you only have like 20 minutes to play.
> Bernice: Or do whatever they expect you to do. Play whatever sport they expect you to do.
> Thalía: And you have to do the warm up.
> Bernice: And then the teacher doesn't even know about the sport. Like soccer, they would make us like play with those bungi soccer balls inside the gym. When it was like a beautiful day outside. And she wouldn't let us go outside and play soccer on the field where soccer is actually played. She would always tell us to play inside in the gym where it's all crowded and people would hit and I got into a fight with this girl…'cause she kicked me and I kicked her back and she was like stupid.

Bernice and Thalía expressed frustration that the sport of soccer is sacrificed when it is fragmented into basic skills. Even when the weather permits an authentic game on the soccer field, the teacher opts for drills in a crowded gym. This has a striking parallel to the critique of transmission education in academic areas when content such as reading is fragmented into rote memorization of isolated facts (Freire, 1970). Yet, this is not the only frustration communicated by Bernice and Thalía's words. They were also frustrated that the students are subjected to the will of the teacher and must "do whatever *they* [the teachers] expect you to do."

The perspectives of my participants indicated that they are experiencing the type of teacher-centered education that is so often condemned in research but still prevails in schools (McNeil, 2000; Nieto, 1994). Their comments also corroborated claims that children who are experiencing this style of schooling are not only alienated with school but also articulate at naming the source of their frustration (Freire, 1970). Further, their observations are aligned with literature on school reform (Nieto, 2000).

Authoritarian Teachers

> Me: What might teachers do to make school better?
> Jaqueline: Stop being so mean.
> Ines: Yeah, like don't boss you around. Stuff like that.

When school is characterized by a teacher-centered environment, students are asked to be passive recipients of information. In this banking model (Freire, 1970) control becomes an issue. As illustrated in the preceding quote, Jaqueline and Ines perceived teachers as "mean" and bossing students around. My participants commented on the authoritarian stance taken by many of their teachers. Tony pointed to authoritarian teachers as the main reason children do not like school.

> Tony: Most people at this school hate school because you have too many stereotype teachers here.
> Me: How do you mean?
> Tony: They expect to have teachers like: (he puts on a nasal monotone voice) "Class be quiet. Quit talking. Young man be quiet."
> Joe: (also imitating a teacher voice) "Detention"
> Tony: Teachers like that are like…boring teachers.

When Tony imitated what he considered to be a "stereotype teacher" he focused on the issue of classroom management. The words he selected—certainly he and the others have heard them countless times—indicated a teacher having a power struggle with the class. The teacher tells children to be quiet so the lesson can continue. If they do not obey, they will be punished, as Joe pointed out, with detention.

When students are not invested in the goings on of the classroom because the teacher's agenda is entirely content focused and instruction is top–down, teachers act authoritarian because they must struggle to control the students (Pitton, 2001). When my participants were in seventh grade I conducted a pilot study at Live Oak. I shadowed two of my former elementary school students for 2 weeks. During this time I spent a few days in math class with Tony. The following vignette is from a lesson I observed in his math class. The scene in the vignette corroborates his and the other students' perceptions of authoritarian teachers in teacher-centered classrooms as well as the literature regarding teacher-centered instruction. The teacher in the vignette sounds very much like the stereotypical teacher he was imitating in the previous transcript.

The fifth-period bell rang to initiate the beginning of math class. Twenty-eight Latino and African American children filled the room crowded with desks facing the front. On a wall near the front of the room was a small display of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS); this served as the room's sole decoration. On the overhead was a warm-up exercise about adding positive and negative integers.

"Miss, I don't have that piece of paper," came a voice from the middle of the room. Children were engaged in side conversations and did not appear to be working. Tony took out his paper and quickly did the 10 problems. He looked at me and said, "I wish I was still with Ms. Ayala [his elementary school math teacher]. This is boring. It's too hard." A boy next to him was slouched in his chair looking frustrated. He tried to look on Tony's paper and asked him in Spanish how to do it. Tony gave him the answers.

Another girl circulated around the class passing out papers. She laughed and teased students as she handed them their papers. "Who is Tony?" she called out, stopping on the paper of this unknown student. The girl in front of us yelled back, "He's over here." The boy across from Tony did not get a paper back. The class was going to grade the papers, and other students who did not have one were raising their hands and asking the teacher for a copy. When I asked Tony if he needed a paper, he shook his head no and said to himself, "Zero."

Ms. Chappell was a slim blond woman in a starched pink button-down shirt tucked into Wrangler jeans and secured with a brown leather belt. She addressed the class in a Texas drawl. "You act like you've never been here," she reprimanded the students in an angry tone.

> *We are going to start locking you out if you are not here when the bell rings. Three of you were late. You are talking now. This is unacceptable. You had a substitute on Thursday and Friday and I heard you behaved very badly. Then you had the PSAT yesterday. Maybe you have just got out of sync for how things work in this classroom. Well now I am going to put you back in sync.*

She continued by talking about consequences they would face if they did not behave, including phone calls to their parents and after-school detention. Ms. Chappell continued by informing the class that they would take a test, and because they had been misbehaving they also must complete a multiplication table to be handed in with the exam. Shouts of student protest fell on deaf ears as the teacher continued to explain that they were going to pull back from the textbook for a while because they needed to focus more on the mastery of basic skills and the TEKS. As she distributed the test pages she told the students to clear their desks of everything except for a pencil and paper. She informed them that they must first put their names on the paper and then show their work and write the answers. Once the tests were distributed children were quiet and appeared to be working.

"Shamika, put your back against the chair and your feet under your desk," the teacher's voice broke the silence.

"My feet are under my desk," responded the student from the back of the room, her voice was angry.

"Shamika, if I have to call your name one more time, you will be out of here."

"Where am I going to go?" challenged the adolescent girl.

"Why don't you make the choice?" At this point Shamika mumbled some angry words under her breath. At this Ms. Chappell snapped, "Go stand in the hall."

Raising her voice Shamika replied, "NO."

"I don't want to hear it," responded the teacher. Shamika leaned back and whispered to a couple of girls near her and then she appeared to get to work, still sitting sideways in her chair, as if the exchange with the teacher never happened.

The curricular emphasis in this math class was clearly highlighted by the lone decoration on the walls (TEKS—state standards). The teacher's comments about the PSAT, the fact that they would be pulling back from the textbook to focus on mastery of basic skills and TEKS, and her use of a math quiz as punishment highlighted a traditional teacher-centered curriculum. In this curriculum state-mandated objectives are centered, and individual students who make up the class are incidental. The students may be incidental to the teacher's lesson plan, but their resistance forces the teacher to notice them and act in authoritative and controlling ways.

For instance, addressing the class upon arrival, the teacher spoke in an angry tone reprimanding them for being late and unruly. She threatened the entire class that if they come late they will be locked out of the room. It is as if she does not even need the students in the room to teach the content in her lesson plan. Judging from the students' behavior in the class, I wonder if being locked out would be considered a punishment for them. Next, she scolded the students for acting badly when they had a substitute teacher. Her words, "Maybe you have just got out of sync for how things work in this classroom. Well now I am going to put you back in sync," treat the children as if they were objects that she can control forcefully (Freire, 1970). Punishment was her key means of achieving control, since students demonstrated a lack of interest in the academic content through their misbehavior. In her arsenal she

included calls to parents, detention, and pop quizzes. Rather than finding ways to demonstrate that math is important for the students' lives or dialoguing with students to try to connect math to their lives and interests, this teacher attempted to use fear as a means of gaining students' attention.

Her attempt clearly was not working. Take the example of the student named Shamika who engaged in a confrontation about the way she was sitting on her chair. This student did not seem afraid of the consequences of disobeying the teacher. In fact, she directly challenged Ms. Chappell when she talked back to her. It is ironic that a teacher so focused on controlling her students resorted to telling Shamika to make a choice of what she was going to do. This was the first and only time I ever heard the word *choice* in this classroom. I am not sure what this teacher meant by those words. It seemed that she was saying that Shamika could choose between accepting the teacher's demands for appropriate seat etiquette or she could leave the room. It seemed that Shamika found a different "choice": She chose to ignore the teacher. This is not the type of choice that constructivist researchers are talking about when they argue for the need for more student decision making in the classroom (Powell, 2001).

The teaching style of Ms. Chappell mirrors the traditional subject-centered and top–down schooling that is common in middle schools (Pitton, 2001). One would be hard pressed to find a student in the classroom in this example who took the work seriously. Even Tony, who was able to breeze through the warm-up problems, claimed the work was too hard. The content being too intellectually demanding for

him did not lead to this statement; I believe the opposite was true. What was hard for Tony in this case was doing work that to him had no purpose.

Tony explained a similar phenomenon when he talked about his current history class: "First period I have really boring history, but after you are done with your work you can get a hall pass and go to the library and play on the computers. If I don't go to the library I am bored." In this statement Tony makes clear that the work in class is nothing more than an obstacle he has to get over in order to play. The quicker he is able to get through the work, the sooner he can go to the library away from the demands of the teacher and play on the computers, something he wants to do. In the math class vignette, the boy next to Tony opted for a zero on an assignment rather than raise his hand to get a copy of the work. It seemed that this boy had tuned out intellectually because the content of the skills-based drills is disconnected from his life and thus has no meaning for him. If he were at all compelled to do the work for class, he likely would have at least asked to have the assignment. The two boys acted in different ways to combat the boredom they feel in school. However, the outcome is the same: Both are disengaged students who view work in class as a nuisance.

The authoritarian role of the teacher in the vignette with her emphasis on seatwork, control, and mastery of the "basics" illustrates what Haberman (1991) termed "the pedagogy of poverty." Poor children not only face economic hardships in their lives, they also go to schools that serve them a daily dose of impoverished curriculum and poor teaching, leaving them malnourished when it comes to

intellectual engagement at school. Haberman described classrooms very similar to the ones described by my participants and the one in the vignette. He was highly critical of the assumption that these tactics are necessary for students to gain skills before they can be involved in higher level critical thinking tasks. I believe that the meta-level conversations by my participants about their alienation with school that is top–down supports Haberman's assertions and shows that they are very capable of high-level intellectual tasks. In fact, the lack of opportunity to be intellectually engaged seems to lead students to resist academic content and tune out in class. Going back to the quote by Wood (1997), students in teacher-directed classrooms are "bored" and this boredom "is driven by what they perceive as the inability of adults to see them as capable young people" (p. 147).

Agency—Sometimes Grabbed by Young People Through Resistance and Socializing

Up to this point I have talked about the lack of freedom my participants experience in the teacher-centered environment of their school. This lack of freedom translates to a lack of perceived agency in terms of curricular matters. However, this is not to say that children surrender themselves to be steamrolled by the oppressive structure of the system. When students are subjected to teacher-centered instruction, they find other ways to express their agency.

In the example of Tony's seventh-grade math class, children in a teacher-centered authoritarian environment seemed to be forced to follow the teacher's agenda or express agency through resistance. This is a common reaction to the

authoritarian structures of school. Pitton (2001) stated, "For many young adolescents, there seems to be no purpose to being in school, no feeling that they are being allowed to develop and have a voice, and so they choose to act out" (p. 24). Shamika provided a wonderful illustration of this with her power struggle with the teacher. My participants also noted this dynamic at school.

As I have stated earlier, the students who made the movie *A Day at School* and the others who viewed and discussed it spoke mostly of a lack of agency felt by students in teacher-centered environments. As I noted, even the questions in the film pointed to these feelings of a lack of agency. The teachers were attributed with the power to make school engaging or make school boring, and this was determined by the types of activities they chose for students and the atmosphere they created in their classrooms.

However, my participants noted that students do play a role in making school more interesting. The way that students express agency and make school interesting is by subverting the teachers' agenda. One means for reaching this goal is through disruption of class. Bernice explained how this happens:

> Kids are the ones who make it fun. . . . Teachers make you do certain stuff but sometimes troublemakers don't listen to the teachers, and that makes it fun and interesting, because you spend some time and you see the student and the teacher yelling at each other and that makes it kind of fun. It might be kind of fun for them, but then they get the consequences. But we don't get the consequences so we don't care. It's fun when they start to argue. That's one part and the other part is when you start to talk to each other. It's always like making the teacher mad. That's the fun part.

Bernice pointed out that "teachers make you do certain stuff" in teacher-centered classrooms. The stuff she is referring to is schoolwork and is perceived as boring and disconnected from students' lives. She spoke about the students she called "troublemakers" with admiration because they have the courage to not "listen to the teachers," which makes school "fun and interesting" not only for the ones causing trouble but also for the other students in the class. Causing trouble is one way the students have found to grab agency in an environment where the teacher uses authority to attempt to control the classroom. When students act out, they force the class to diverge from the teachers' plan; this is a demonstration of power.

Bernice prefers to be a spectator to the resistance. She appreciates the students who are willing to deal with the consequences for their resistance but she does not want to go there herself. Unlike the children in Tony's math class who did not seem concerned with the consequences of their behavior, Bernice seemed to be more careful in this regard. Bernice, who is a magnet student, may feel more invested in succeeding in school and therefore does not want to hurt her chances by angering her teachers. Gender may also be a factor in this, as Nieto (1999) pointed out; female students tend to display more docile and obedient behavior in the classroom. Her outward appearance may seem like a student who is complacent, but inside she is delighted at the transgressions of bold students.

A second form of the resistance to the teacher-centered agenda is socializing with friends. Thalía explained, "Another thing that's fun is 'cause you have your friends and you can talk to them and do your work at the same time." Socializing

takes on a particular importance in adolescence (Perry, 2002). The boy interviewed in the film *A Day at School* pointed to socializing as important to him. When asked what teachers could do to make school more fun he said, "They should make it in like a group where you can talk to your friends and you won't have to be separate without them." The need to socialize with peers that is felt by these adolescents is not supported in teacher-centered classrooms and leads to trouble for the students. This came up as an issue for my participants. Ines and Jaqueline agreed that getting in trouble for socializing is one of the key ways to avoid boredom in school.

> Ines: In Algebra if we didn't get in trouble it would not be fun.
> Jaqueline: Me and Ines we always get in trouble because we are always talking.
> Ines: Mostly me. They always call my mom.
> Jaqueline: Yeah they always call her mom when me and Margie are talking and Ines's not even talking.

Ines and Jaqueline have come to the conclusion that the only way to make class fun is to get in trouble by talking with friends. They corroborated Bernice's statement that "kids are the ones who make [school] fun" by getting in trouble. The trouble for them is a byproduct of socializing with friends when they are supposed to be doing their work. For Jaqueline this is especially exciting because she has managed to avoid the consequences. Jaqueline's statement is similar to Bernice's desire for disruption but not consequences. Ines, however, does feel the repercussions; the teacher often calls her mom. I know Ines's mother, and I am sure that she is upset that Ines is not behaving in school. However, Ines did not seem overly concerned about the calls home.

Whatever discomfort Ines feels from the calls home, it must seem worth it, because it does not deter her from continuing to talk with friends in class. There is an even more devastating consequence that Ines shrugs off with a laugh. Informally, before I began taping our conversation she informed me that she was failing Algebra because she never turns in any work. It is hard for me to understand how this girl who in my class in elementary school was so conscientious and such a good student could fail math. It is not because she is not capable of doing the work; it is simply because she is not applying herself. I wonder what is at stake for Ines that leads her to refuse to comply with the demands of the teacher. I do not blame Ines for failing math; I believe the evidence points to a school experience governed by scientific management that treats her like an intellectually hollow object. She is insulted (Wood, 1997) by being considered an empty vessel for teachers to fill. It seems that her refusal to obey a controlling teacher and to learn algebra is a means of maintaining her self-respect (Kohl, 1994). It could be said that Ines is failing school, but it seems more apt to say that school is failing Ines, a smart kid who can't find a good enough reason to do her work.

Students' Ideas to Make School Better

Given the teacher-centered environment that my participants described, it is not surprising that they feel a lack of agency in terms of making school a better place. Considering their lack of freedom in terms of the curriculum, it should come as no surprise that my participants attributed the power to make positive changes to the

teachers. This does not mean that it is impossible for the students to envision school as a more engaging place. My participants were able to express ideas about how school could be changed so that it would be a better place for them.

In the movie *A Day at School* the filmmakers asked the question "What might teachers do to make the school environment better?" The boy who was interviewed in the movie answered the question by proposing that students should be able to work more in groups with their friends. He smiled when he said this, and it seemed that he was only semiserious because he felt that this was a far-fetched goal. In terms of how my participants described school, I would concur. When I informally questioned teachers about why they did not allow children to work more in groups, the common response was that it would be impossible to control them. One teacher explained that if he had his class work in small groups, a fistfight likely would break out because these kids cannot handle the freedom. This view is reminiscent of Pitton's (2001) claim that fear of "hormonally charged young people" (p. 23) is a common theme that leads teachers to act in authoritarian top–down styles.

When the girls discussed their ideas about the question in the movie they opined that teachers should try to change the routine and include a diverse range of activities. They used the Latin American Studies class from the movie as an example. Thalía explained that after they finished the unit on salsa dancing they began another one on murals. While they studied murals of Mexico they worked on painting a mural as a group activity. What Thalía described are hands-on, purposeful, group activities that are connected to the academic content of the curriculum. These are the types of

experiences that engage adolescents in ways that address their social, emotional, physical, and cognitive development (Pitton, 2001).

Jaqueline thought children should be able to do whatever they want. She gave an example of a substitute who was in her Language Arts class that day. According to Jaqueline, he was not like a regular teacher because he was young, having just graduated college, and still understood what school was really like. Although I am sure she realized her example is not a serious possibility in terms of school reform, it does highlight her cynicism about academics based on her experiences in school.

> Jaqueline: The substitute was young so he got how school was—that you don't really want to do your work, that you just want to be gossiping and flirting.
> Ines: Yeah, so he let us do that. That was cool.
> Jaqueline: He said he didn't care because he got paid either way.
> Bernice: So did you do your work?
> Ines: No. I listened to my CD player the whole time.
> Jaqueline: Ines doesn't even do her work when Ms. De la Fuente is there.

Jaqueline explained that kids their age do not want to be doing work; what they want to do is gossip and flirt. Ines agreed and stated that she spent the period listening to her music. This happened because they had a substitute teacher who did not have the authority to punish children for not obeying, or perhaps as Jaqueline pointed out he understood adolescent children and wanted them to be happy. I do not want to be misunderstood; I include this example not because I am suggesting that children be free to do whatever they want, but to highlight the fact that "the work" was work that the teacher left for the students and was not something they were compelled to do. In fact, as Jaqueline pointed out, Ines does not do the work even

when the teacher is there. For Ines and many of her peers, the work is never worthwhile and engaging because it is teacher-centered; she does not see it as important to her life.

When the boys were asked to respond to this same question, they had more academically oriented and, in my opinion, reasonable suggestions. What the boys suggested was for schoolwork to be more engaging. They felt this could be achieved through hands-on activities.

> Me: What might teachers do to make school better?
> Joe: Do hands on activities. Not like, "Do this worksheet. Do this" (in a teacher voice).
> T: Yeah, just like that teacher (he points to the TV) that history teacher was doing—teaching them to dance.
> D: They should—I mean you could still educate 'em and still have fun at the same time. And they should do that more often.
> Me: Do you have any ideas on how?
> D: Like math. Let them go onto Coolmath.com or something like that . . . or take them out and do something instead of doing all those problems.
> Joe: Yeah, like nothing but worksheets.
> D: Yeah.
> Joe: Like my fourth-period Algebra, she makes us just look at the overhead and do math. (He imitates the motion of copying from the overhead.) We do the same thing everyday over and over. Usually now I start falling asleep. A bunch of kids start falling asleep . . . and some kids started complaining, "You make it too boring," but she doesn't do nothing.

Joe contrasted the teacher-centered curriculum characterized by worksheets with a more engaging possibility that would include hands-on activities. Tony agreed with Joe and used the example of the Latin American Studies class where kids were learning to dance salsa. Even DeAndre, who earlier expressed opinions that school was not a place to have fun, offered the idea of doing math games on the Internet rather than skills-based worksheets. All three boys suggested that rather than drills

and isolated skills directed by teachers, they yearn to be actively engaged in authentic tasks that they see as meaningful to their lives (Cummins, 1986/2001; Dewey, 1938).

Joe's final comment is sobering because it brings the conversation back to reality. The boys began to imagine a school experience where they were excited and engaged until Joe remembered that in real life math class consists of following the teacher's agenda, including copying problems from the overhead day in and day out. For children who are asked to be so passive that they fall asleep in class, is it any wonder that they feel a lack of freedom and agency in school?

What Is at Stake?

In this chapter we have seen how students are silenced when they try to practice self-determination, as in Bernice and Thalía's interaction with their language arts teacher. We have seen the frustration students feel in teacher-centered classroom contexts as was evidenced by Bernice's comments about the movie *Pleasantville*, the interview of the boy in *A Day at School*, and Tony's seventh-grade math class. In addition we have heard from my participants about how school is not engaging and how students tune out when they are subjected constantly to teacher domination. In such a situation students express agency the only way they can: by resisting the teachers either actively through disruptive behavior and socializing or less directly as willing spectators enjoying the break from the monotonous drill and skill of their daily routine.

The critique of their teacher-dominated school experiences and their expressed desire for more active, hands-on experiences and more peer interaction and collaboration are strikingly aligned with research on schooling. Progressive and critical researchers have made similar observations and critiques of traditional schooling (Apple, 1979; Cummins, 1986/2001; Freire, 1970). Though my participants did not use terms like *transmission model* when describing their experiences or *progressive*, *liberatory*, and *open classrooms* when they talked about what they desired, their comments were very much aligned with critics of traditional authoritarian schooling such as Dewey (1938), Freire (1970), and Kohl (1969). What my participants and these critics of traditional education have in common is an advocacy for pedagogical freedom.

The picture painted by my participants is grim. They are insulted, frustrated, and bored by their lack of pedagogical freedom. It is as if the students and teachers are stuck in a catch-22 where teachers act in authoritarian ways and deliver teacher-centered curriculum because they feel they must control the children. The children then tune out or act out as a way to resist the insult on their intellect. The disengaged and often disruptive behavior of the students then signals to the teachers the need for more authoritarian measures. It is a downward spiral that ultimately ends with students who hate school and feel no possibility for self-determination.

From John Dewey (1916) to Maxine Greene (1988), philosophers of education have highlighted the need for students to be active coconstructors of their educational experiences and to take part in making choices concerning their own

destinies (Beane & Apple, 1995). It has been argued that such student-centered pedagogy is of great importance because it allows students opportunities to be engaged intellectually (Dewey, 1938), to learn to self-regulate (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997), to take ownership of their learning (Freire, 1970), and even to learn about the meaning of democracy through firsthand experiences (Beane & Apple, 1995; Dewey, 1916). Additionally, teachers are beneficiaries when students are given freedom within the curriculum. When teachers give up some of their power over curricular matters they, too, benefit, because it allows them to know their students on a much deeper level as individuals (Ayers, 1993; Dewey, 1938).

When teachers embrace student-centered pedagogy their role shifts from transmission of facts and policing behavior to that of a guide whose job is to connect learning objectives to the interests and life experiences of students. Students in this model have pedagogical freedom to explore areas of curriculum based on their individual desires and needs. A goal of democratic schooling is for students to become creators rather than consumers of curriculum. Bean and Apple (1995) stated,

> A democratic curriculum invites young people to shed the passive role of knowledge consumers and assume the active role of "meaning makers." It recognizes that people acquire knowledge by both studying external sources and engaging in complex activities that require them to construct their own knowledge. (p. 16)

The idea that students "construct their own knowledge" and therefore must "shed the passive role of knowledge consumers" counters the view of students as empty vessels in need of filling that is characteristic of traditional banking education (Freire, 1970). In contrast to the emphasis of the banking model on the drilling of

isolated basic skills, Bean and Apple (1995) called for a curricular emphasis on complex activities and critical thinking.

Pedagogical freedom is crucial for children in middle school because it addresses the developmental needs of teenagers. Adolescence is a time characterized by exploration and a newfound push for independence (Pitton, 2001). However, schools often do not reflect these developmental needs of their students. Pitton stated,

> While many educators can recite a litany of young adolescent needs, their own reaction to the adolescent's push for independence and self-determination is often to try to squash the emerging sense of self with control and directives. (p. 25)

Why would middle school classrooms reflect a teacher-focused, content-directed, authoritarian approach when teachers are aware that this approach does not reflect the children's needs? "Perhaps it is that teachers find a classroom of hormonally charged young people innately threatening, so keeping control becomes paramount" (Pitton, 2001, p. 23). Letting go of control of the curriculum and asking students what they would like to learn asks teachers to move out of their comfort zones. But it is precisely when teachers let go of control that the students have opportunities to express themselves freely. Over 20 years later, Powell (2001) argued in the same vein as Kohl (1969) that these types of decision-making opportunities not only help adolescents develop into maturity but also help teachers value their students as individuals. Powell stated,

> Decision making that gives students an investment in the on goings of the school might cause adult educators to see early adolescents as more than hormone-raging beings that must look inwardly in their decision making, not

> outwardly toward the larger society and how they fit into this society with their ability to make decisions that are socially significant. (p. 144)

Middle school students need opportunities to share in decision making in the classroom to feel invited into the learning process and to develop their potential.

The mismatch between the emerging needs of adolescents and the reality of teacher-centered classrooms may result in a lack of motivation and interest in school. This is a particularly urgent concern in middle school where "students are at the crossroads in their educational development, and for many, the sense that there is no purpose to their schooling creates a feeling of apathy and disinterest" (Pitton, 2001, p. 25). This feeling often leads to failure and dropping out of school. This is a particularly urgent problem among children of color and children of working-class and working-poor backgrounds (Nieto, 2000).

The teacher-centered environment at school seems to have led my participants to express the viewpoint that agency to make school an engaging place lies in the hands of teachers. The perspectives brought forth by my participants are aligned with the progressive education literature and the critical educational literature. However, it is not just for these reasons that we must take a closer look at the impact of the lack of pedagogical freedom.

In late spring I ate lunch with Thalía and Bernice. We sat in the cafeteria and chatted about their plans for next year when they enter high school. Both girls had decided to go to the neighborhood high school. "Why don't you go to a magnet high school?" I asked, distraught at the possibility that they are giving up hope for college-

track, advanced academics. Bernice laughed and rolled her eyes, “I’m not smart enough to go to a magnet high school.” Thalía nodded. Both of these girls honestly believe that they are not intelligent enough to make it in a magnet high school. When they started in the magnet middle school they were self-confident, successful elementary school children who were eager to continue with academics. Something happened in their schooling that convinced them that they were not intelligent as they once thought. If I have done my job as writer of this paper, it should be abundantly clear from the data that they are highly intelligent; the fact that they do not see this is criminal. My reaction to their words that day in the cafeteria was disappointment and disagreement. Though I disagreed and tried to convince them otherwise, it seemed nothing I could say would change their opinions of their intellectual capabilities.

Bernice’s story holds very troubling implications. For her and many children around the country who experience school in a similar way, a curriculum of poverty is alienating them with school and keeping them down. In the case of Bernice and many other children of color, the mismatch between school and home is producing a large body of alienated students by systematically crushing their spirits. School is teaching them that despite what they may have believed about their academic potential and despite their dreams of college, they are not “smart” and should look elsewhere for fulfillment.

As I have stated, in elementary school Bernice was a confident and successful student. She considered herself smart and capable of academic success. She applied and was accepted to a middle school magnet program. Three years later she was

convinced that she is not "smart" enough to continue on this track. In school she has learned that being smart is defined by following directives, being separated from friends, and passively accepting the expert status of teachers. This is more than she can stomach; it does not feel right, and she is convinced that perhaps there is something wrong with her because school does not seem to fit her needs.

Highly intelligent children who want to succeed in school are being shut out because school is hugely mismatched with their life experiences. There is no good reason that Bernice, or any of my other participants, all of whom were eager and successful students in elementary school, should have to struggle so hard to just to get by in middle school. When they talk about their experiences in class it is painfully obvious that school does not fit their needs. These are children who should be on their way to becoming the next generation of leaders. It is as if there is a conscious effort by the powers that be to keep them down (Nieto, 2000). Bernice and the others are smart and deserve a school experience that provides them the option of becoming motivated and successful students without feeling they are making huge self-sacrifices on the way. As it stands now, school is teaching my participants that they are not cut out for academic success. The logical conclusion to them based on this experience is to pursue other areas of life where they can feel a more comfortable fit.

Societal Freedom

> Beth: What does freedom mean to you?
> Beth's dad: Freedom, it's ethereal.

The opening quote comes from the first interview of Beth's unfinished movie project. Her father's words alone do not do his statement justice. I will attempt to describe the visual image that goes with it. A broad-shouldered, blond man looks straight into the camera with a twinkle in his eye and a tickled grin under a rugged red lumberjack beard; slowly he takes a deep breath and releases these words from somewhere way down deep in his soul. With the confidence and conviction of Pat Robertson he is letting all of us in on some wonderful news. Although it is hard to get your hands around the idea of freedom, Beth's father explained that it carries a tremendous moral obligation not to abuse it or you "corrupt the very thought of freedom." I start with the words of Beth's father because his position is very much a reflection of dominant culture's views on the subject, and because—like the other participants—Beth is influenced by her family's positionality and the relationship between her family's worldview and that of school.

The notion of pedagogical freedom discussed in the preceding section of this chapter falls under a larger category of freedom that I call societal freedom. Societal freedom is one of the most cherished ideals of American democracy. The rhetoric of the United States is based on the promise that people have a fundamental right to be free. This right implies that people have power in their daily lives. The power can and should be used not only to realize our dreams as individuals but also to act in order to correct problems that exist.

Schools are tied to the ideal of societal freedom. They are based on the principles of individual meritocracy and function to reproduce a collective

understanding of what it means to live in a free democratic society (Apple, 1979). This implies that all students have equal access to education, and those students who work hard will be rewarded and eventually will succeed in society. A large part of the underlying message of individual meritocracy is the belief that schools are society's "great equalizer" (McLaren, 1994). Schools are considered equalizers because children from all socioeconomic strata attend school; therefore, it is often believed that all children have the same chances to achieve social and economic mobility. In other words, schools are supposed to be and to create a level playing field.

Individual meritocracy and schools as equalizers are ideas so deeply woven into the social fabric of dominant culture in the United States that they often go unquestioned. They are ideas that are often considered to be common sense. However, for quite some time critical researchers have examined hegemony and schooling and have argued that schools act as powerful agents in the economic and cultural reproduction of race and class relations in a stratified society (Apple, 1979). Therefore, schools by design serve White, middle-class children better than they do children of color (Delpit, 1995; Scheurich & Young, 1997). When meritocracy is left unexamined it acts to distract attention from the issue that racism, institutional and societal, is at the root of school failure for children of color and instead places blame on individual students for their lack of school success.

It is no coincidence that the one White participant in my study was the lone critic of the thesis of the student-made movie *A Day at School.* Beth objected to the message that students feel school is boring. According to Beth, the attitude towards

school among her and her friends (White magnet students) is quite the opposite; they love it. This section starts by examining Beth's background. Next I will look at Beth's views about the movie *A Day at School* and then look at the topic she chose for her movie, *Does Freedom Exist?* In this section I hope to highlight the point that White privilege plays a role in making school fit for White students, but meritocracy is how the fit gets explained.

Beth's Background

Beth is a White magnet student at Live Oak. She is a serious student and has been at least since I have known her when she was in third grade. During our time together in this study she was being actively recruited by four area high schools and often commented on her exhaustion from the various entrance exams and application essays she was completing in addition to her regular schoolwork. Her passion is drama and she has been an active participant in the school drama club. Eventually she chose to attend a magnet high school for the performing arts where she could pursue her interests in theater along with her academic goals of becoming a lawyer.

Beth delights in impressing adults by showing her maturity. After school each day she goes to the Boy's and Girl's Club, an after-school childcare facility, and helps the teachers there care for the younger children. On Mondays and Wednesdays she stayed after to help me put away all of the equipment and clean up the room when we finished with our group sessions. We always chatted while working. After Session 7 we talked about our families. As she talked her family story unfolded like a country

music song, full of drama and hard times. She especially highlighted her many adult-like responsibilities.

Beth's parents have been divorced since she was 12. She lives with her father in a working-class neighborhood near the middle school.

> My dad works for rich people in their homes. He installs and fixes home theaters. But he doesn't do just any old ones, he does the top of the line stuff. He is like really good at it and he just got a promotion.

When she talked about her father Beth's voice was proud; she loves and idolizes him. Her drive to excel in school is at least in part inspired by the influence of her father's example to be "the best" at what he does.

Her younger brother (seventh grade) and younger sister (sixth grade) also live with them. "I am like a mother to them," Beth explained. Since her parents' divorce, Beth assumed a role in looking out for her brother and sister. This has proved to be a difficult task; she regularly goes to talk to her siblings' teachers to make sure they are doing their work and behaving in class. Her two younger siblings are not stellar students like her, and they often have disciplinary problems at school. "My brother just got suspended from school for getting in a fight. They might kick him out of Live Oak, and then he'll have to go live with my mom and go to school out there [where her mom lives]." I will never forget the meeting I had with Beth when her little brother Peter was in fourth grade. He decided to enroll in my after-school science club and was disruptive from the beginning. He sat in the back of the room and talked with friends and even messed up other children's experiments just for a laugh. It seemed to me that Peter did not have any interest in botany but was coming to my

room for the sole intention of being disruptive. After a couple of weeks of talking to him, then separating him from the other boys, I was at my wits' end and ready to throw him out. This is when Beth stepped in and requested a conference. I found myself appealing to her by citing specific examples of her brother's behaviors while she nodded her head knowingly. "We have the same problems with him at home," she assured me, "he has a really hard time focusing. I will have a talk with him. Please give him another chance." I do not know what Beth ended up saying to Peter, but he remained in the science club and his behavior improved light years.

The population in Beth's household recently doubled and Beth is frustrated by her new living situation. "My dad adopted a family. It is such a pain, I can't wait until they move out. The twins are driving me crazy." Beth's face is flushed red as she tells how her father has taken in a woman and her 4-year-old twins temporarily until she can get back on her feet. Their small house is now cramped, and Beth often has to take care of the two little ones, who are very rambunctious.

Beth explained how her dad came to "adopt" a family.

> One day after film club my dad came to pick me up because it was raining. We saw this woman walking with two kids and my dad stopped to give them a ride. They were living at the Salvation Army and the father of the kids is in jail. My dad felt sorry for them and we ended up taking them to dinner. . . . My dad got to be friends with Janelle [the woman] and then she asked if they could stay with us for 2 weeks until she saved enough money for an apartment. That was 2 ½ months ago!

Beth let out a frustrated sigh with these words. On one hand she admires her father's generosity, but on the other she has had enough of living with this woman and her 4-year-old twins. "When they first came to live with us Janelle was a waitress at Risqué

[a nearby topless bar], but she quit the day after they moved in." In Beth's mind the woman does not seem to be trying very hard to get her own place, and this frustrates Beth. By quitting her job the day after she moved in to their house, Beth feels this woman has shown her true intention of taking advantage of her father's goodwill. She finds the woman and her children's presence an imposition on her family.

> Then she got a job at The Airstrip [another topless bar]. That one is out by the airport and she doesn't have a car. So my dad had to drive her there and pick her up at like 2:00 in the morning every day. And she didn't even keep that job. Now she is working as a waitress at Denny's.

Beth sees her father's actions as altruistic and generous, perhaps to a fault. I did not have the nerve to ask Beth if she thought her father was romantically involved with this woman, although it was the first thing that came to my mind. Beth made no mention of this as a possibility, and her explanation of the situation steered clear of it. I do not know if she just does not want to admit this to herself (or to me) or if perhaps there is no romantic relationship. Beth is a very intelligent young person and is not naïve about relationships, so I find it interesting that this issue was not even considered in her recount of the story.

Beth's mother lives in a small town just outside of the city. "She works as an in-home care provider. She's not a nurse, but she goes into sick people's houses to care for them." Beth explained that she and her brother and sister usually visit their mom on weekends. She added, "I haven't been going lately because we're fighting." Beth has an older half-brother from her mom's first marriage.

> My older half-brother is in jail now. He used to live with us, but he didn't like it. I think he didn't like that he never got to see his dad. But his dad was a truck driver and he was never around.

Beth's mother is now on her sixth marriage. Her current husband had a son who was a couple of years older than Beth. When her mother and stepfather first got married Beth and her siblings split time between their father and mother's houses. "I didn't like going over there because my mom and step-father wanted to make it like a family situation." She rolled her eyes as if to say it did not feel like a family situation to her, "And then I didn't see my dad as much." She continued, "My step-brother died in a motorcycle accident, and since then me and my brother and sister have been living with my Dad and visiting our mom on weekends." Her life has remained this way for the last year, but now that Janelle and the 4-year-olds have invaded their home, Beth's little brother and sister have been pleading to go back and stay with their mom.

It is amazing to think that Beth, who is only 14, has had so much life experience already. Her knowledge of the complex reality of family dynamics, based on firsthand experience, far exceeds her years. The most amazing story is the one Beth attributes to her interest in becoming a lawyer. "When my mom and dad got divorced I wrote the divorce papers for them," she told me, smiling at my expression of disbelief. "It's true. Since then I have done the divorce paperwork for my mom from another marriage and for a bunch of her friends too." She is proud that she can be such an asset to many adults in her life, "I've probably done over 30 divorces

already," she stated triumphantly. "I love doing it because I think law is really interesting and I like learning about people's lives. That's why I want to be a lawyer."

Beth is not an adult, but she has been thrust into an adult role since the divorce of her parents. She looks after her two younger siblings and considers herself to be like a mother to them. In addition, her mother seems to treat her as a grownup, even trusting her with divorce paperwork. These are not the typical experiences of the average middle school student at Live Oak, much less the typical magnet student.

If Beth were failing school it could be explained that schools are designed to fail students from working-class backgrounds and thus reproduce the status quo of society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). According to economic and social reproduction theorists, being from a working-class background and a broken home and with a brother in jail are aspects of Beth's life that should put her in a category at risk of dropping out.

However, Beth is not failing school. She is doing quite the opposite; she stands out as an academic superstar. Her industriousness, honesty, politeness, and elaborate middle-class vocabulary and linguistic style all help her fit quite "naturally" into the structure of school (McLaren, 1994). In fact, she is a teacher's dream student because she takes her schoolwork to heart and constantly pushes herself beyond what is being asked for in class.

Beth has developed social capital (Valenzuela, 1999) that allows her to "pass" as one of the group when she is with her peers at school. Though most of her White peers are from professional and more affluent households than Beth, she self-

identifies as part of the White kids' social group. In the case of Beth, race seems to be a stronger uniting factor than social class. Interestingly, she is quick to point out one significant difference between her and most of her friends: their political perspectives. The magnet focuses on humanities and international studies and has attracted a large percentage of White students who come from professional families with liberal political views. As illustrated in Figure 1, Beth is politically conservative and is not shy about sharing her opinions.

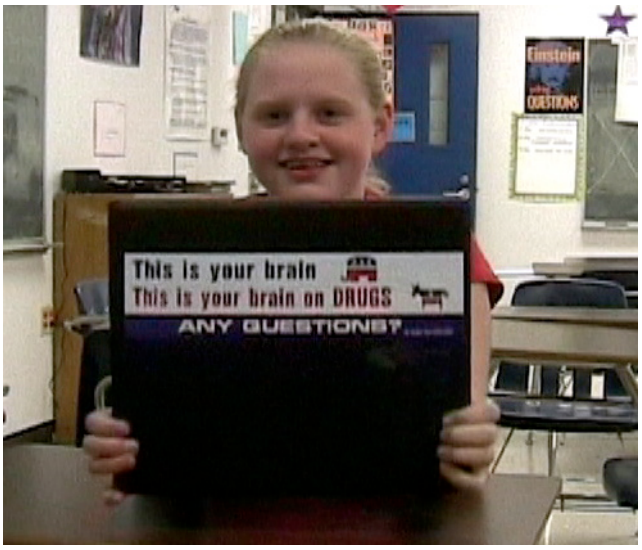

Figure 1. Beth proudly displays her Republican bumper sticker.

Just before I took this picture of Beth and her notebook decorated with a Republican bumper sticker, her close friend was sitting and talking to us. This girl sported dyed purple hair and a T-shirt that had a picture of a destitute-looking Indonesian child with the words, "I made your sneakers but I can't afford shoes."

Shoulder to shoulder the two girls giggled and reported having just finished reading *Lies and the Lying Liars Who Tell Them* (Franken, 2003).

"Loved it," reported the purple haired girl with a big smile.

"Hated it," rebutted Beth with an even bigger smile and then added, "But I love reading Al Franken's books. I'm really into politics and I think he's funny. But I disagree with everything he says."

Beth did not seemed bothered by the fact that in their social group her purple-haired friend represents the dominant worldview and Beth is alone in her conservative stance. She claimed that this is not generally a problem because, like her friends, she loves to talk politics.

School Is not Boring—Goodness of Fit

As I have stated previously, Beth offered the most divergent views from my other participants when discussing the movie *A Day at School*. She was the only one who disagreed outright with the entire thesis of the movie. In her view school is not boring, and she claimed that all of her friends in her social group would agree with her perspective. She stated that she felt the movie was not a good representation of students' perspectives because the moviemakers only solicited the opinion of one student.

> Beth: I guess I felt that this one was selective cause like who they talked to. They only talked to one person. When they had a cafeteria full of 400 people they could have talked to.
> Me: Are you suggesting they talk to all 400 people?

> Beth: No, I'm suggesting they talk to more than one person. And if they did talk to more than one person they should have tried to get some different points of view there, 'cause his point of view is like school is boring. So they should have gotten a point of view from someone who thought that school was fun or thought anything else.

Beth believed that it would have been a more balanced representation had they found other students with differing views about school. Beth recognized that the filmmakers are giving a subjective view of school and her opinion was not represented in their analysis. Beth maintained that the opinion represented by the boy interviewed in the movie was probably based on a reality felt by a group of people with whom the moviemakers hang out. She said, "I could see how they could think that [school is boring] 'cause if that's the group that they hang out with then—I hate saying groups—but that's probably how most of them feel." Her discomfort with discussing issues of race was evident in that she did not mention the fact that she was referring to her group, the White students, and the moviemakers' group, the Latino students, without explicitly saying so. In fact, she interrupted herself to make clear that she "hate[s] saying groups." Why is she reluctant to mention in this instance that she is categorizing people based on race or ethnicity? If she had addressed this issue head on, the implications would counter her deeply held beliefs about individual meritocracy. Had she said that the White kids like school and do not find it boring, but the children of color do not like school and do find it boring, it would have raised the question of why. Unless she believed in an argument of genetic inferiority, which I am sure she does not, it would have thrown into question whether schools really serve everyone equally. I am not suggesting that Beth was consciously avoiding the

subject of race in an attempt to be "politically correct." It is possible that she believes it would be rude or inappropriate to talk about this subject because drawing attention to issues of race might make it seem like she were a racist (Nieto, 2000). I think it is far more likely that she just has not thought about it and perhaps did not even notice that race is a major part of what distinguishes the groups she was referring to in her statement. It is likely because Beth, like most White Americans, has the privilege of not noticing race because she is part of the dominant group in society (McIntyre, 1997). By not wanting to talk about groups she "is simply reflecting the value of being color-blind, which we have been led to believe is both right and fair" (Nieto, 2000, p.79). It is impossible to know for sure why Beth was reluctant to talk about racial groups in this instance. However, this is an important topic that will be addressed in greater detail in the next chapter.

When asked about the second question in the movie, what teachers could do to make school better, again her answer was quite different from that of the other participants in my study. Beth was the one participant who seemed to identify with the plight of her teachers.

> Me: Could you answer the other question they had? What could teachers do to make the school environment better?
> Beth: See, what I'm saying about the movie was that if a teacher saw that, they'd think it was weird because teachers do do activities and some activities don't get done and some of the activities are really cool. But you can't please all of the people all of the time, and I don't know, I think some teachers do too many. Like get involved with too many things at the same time to try to keep the students interested. It depends on what classes you have and what kinds of things you enjoy, I guess.

Unlike the other students in my study who were highly critical of teacher-centered instruction, Beth claimed that teachers do many "cool" activities. She placed blame on many of the students who do not finish the activities the teachers design. It is important to know that Beth has the same teachers as many of the other participants. Bernice, Thalía, Sonia, and Ines are all in the magnet program and are even in some of the same classes as Beth. The others are not in the magnet but have some of the same teachers because most teachers at Live Oak teach in both the magnet and the comprehensive schools. In contrast to the others, Beth believes that some teachers try too hard to capture students' interests and plan too many activities trying to keep students interested. The fact that she finds many of her school activities interesting and even "cool" implies that school is serving her well. There is a fit between Beth's perceptions of what school should be like and her experiences at school.

Though Beth was mainly sympathetic to the plight of teachers in her school, she had one gentle criticism of her classes when asked about what teachers could do to make school better. She felt that some of her teachers did not do enough for students who are at a more advanced level than the other students in the class. She is a magnet student and claimed that the magnet was supposed to deal with this problem, but it did not always work that way.

> Beth: Well, some teachers I guess could do more for some students who are at a more advanced level. But that's hard to do if you don't have a class of students who are at a more advanced level.
> Me: Because the classes are mixed?

> Beth: Yeah. But we have the magnet that tries to take care of that, but I don't think it fully does. That's just my view. Some people think in the magnet there's a lot of work to do, it's really hard. And then there's people like me who think there should be more work because you don't feel like you are living up to your full potential because you don't have stuff to do all the time.

Her stated desire for more work, and higher level work, is drastically different from the views of the other participants in my study. Her comment about "living up to your full potential" is quite different from the concept of living up to your full potential offered by advocates of constructivist teaching who call for more open-ended and heterogeneous group experiences to allow students to develop self-regulation (Cummins, 1986/2001; Pitton, 2001). Beth's views seem to be more aligned with notions of individual meritocracy (McLaren, 1994) and are inherently tied to academic work. "Living up to your full potential" for Beth means doing more work at more advanced levels, which she is determined to do.

The fact that Beth is the only student in my study who expressed this view of academic work and is the only participant who feels school is engaging causes me alarm. Beth is in the magnet program, and higher academic tracks often offer students more autonomy and higher level tasks (i.e., pedagogical freedom) than regular tracks (McNeil, 2000; Oakes, 1985). However, as I have mentioned, she is not the only participant in my study who is in the magnet program. Therefore, academic tracking cannot fully explain this difference. Ines, Sonia, Bernice, and Thalía are also magnet students but do not hold similar views as Beth. Why do the others, who are also highly intelligent children, not hold these same views of schooling? Could it be that

race and ethnicity are strong factors that influence students' perceptions of schooling? The evidence in this chapter and in the next chapter suggests that this is indeed the case.

"Only the Educated Are Free" or "Does Freedom Exist?"

> During my fourth period everyday we come in and start a warm-up. There is one warm-up that we all hate, the in-class writing. January 27 was one of these lousy days. "Only the educated are free," a quote by Epictetus turned this lousy day into an interesting conversation…
>
> "Does Freedom Exist?"
>
> This conversation sparked some serious emotions. We had some people screaming, some laughing, and even a couple crying (me being one of them). (Beth in the introduction to her unfinished movie project, *Does Freedom Exist?*)

When given the freedom to create a movie about a topic of her choice Beth chose to pursue the question, "Does freedom exist?" I include a discussion of her movie here not only because it highlights her thoughts about societal freedom but also because it is significant that she chose a topic that stemmed from a discussion in her English class. The fact that she was the only participant to base her movie on a topic born from her academic experience at school provides further evidence that she is engaged intellectually at school and that school seems to fit for Beth. In addition, it is interesting to see how issues around race and ethnicity were factors that sparked her motivation to concentrate on the topic of freedom but then did little to inform the outcome of her research.

An interesting series of events lead Beth to choose societal freedom as the focus of her movie project. The following vignette illustrates Beth's frustrations of

feeling silenced because of her political perspective that is divergent from the mainstream views in her classes. I believe it helps to highlight a few different layers of the issue of freedom.

1. First, on the surface is Beth's experience in class that shows the pedagogical freedom she and her classmates receive from a teacher who asked them to discuss a difficult topic. This is further supported by the fact that she was so engaged in this schoolwork that she chose a topic for her movie that stemmed from the English class discussion.

2. In addition, there is the dynamic of competing definitions of societal freedom, which is influenced by race.

3. On another level, there is Beth's frustration of feeling silenced by her peers and therefore feeling that she sometimes lacks the freedom to openly express her opinions. Beth is a White person accustomed to the privilege and power accorded to White people by the schooling process; she feels frustrated that her voice is not heard and is willing to demand and claim that right.

4. Finally, there is the incredible sense of agency and confidence in her academic abilities that demonstrate a societal freedom that exists for White children; it is a freedom that comes with privilege and opportunity.

The different layers of this issue interact to demonstrate Beth's beliefs about freedom as well as showing how pedagogical freedom and issues of race contribute to Beth's and other children's views about societal freedom. This led her to throw up her arms in frustration and cry out, "Does freedom exist?"

The following vignette highlights how I became involved in the story of Beth's quest for an answer to her question about freedom. The story recounts the events after Beth became frustrated in English class leading to her choice of a movie topic in our after-school program.

It was a Tuesday night and I was sitting at the kitchen table writing up fieldnotes when the phone rang. "Hello Jesse. This is John Feldman. How are you?"

Bracing myself for what I was sure to be trouble, I managed to squeak out, "Fine thanks. How are you?" Mr. Feldman is a teacher at Live Oak and I was borrowing his room for my after-school sessions with my participants. I do not know him well and he had never before called me at home. He was often in the room doing paperwork during our sessions, and I frequently wondered what he was thinking as he watched our discussions out of the corner of his eye. Ever since Bernice and Thalía had the incident with their teacher I had been walking on eggshells worried that Mr. Feldman, in solidarity with his colleague, would somehow become offended with my project.

"I am calling about Beth. She had a rough day in my class today and she came up to talk to me after school, but I was with a parent and didn't get a chance to talk to her. I am not going to be at school tomorrow so I wondered if you would talk to her and make sure she's alright when you go in tomorrow?" The voice coming through the phone receiver was slow and sincere, reflecting a heartfelt concern. This was not a call to sabotage my project. It was a teacher who genuinely felt concern for

one of his students, so much so that he took time away from his newborn baby to call me in the evening to see if I could help.

"What happened?" I asked curious to know what could be rough for Beth in an Advanced Placement English class—what seemed to me to be one place Beth would feel the most comfortable.

"Well, the students were talking about freedom in this country and an Asian American girl in the class said, 'Money buys freedom,' and she tied that to racism. All of the other kids in the class are White. Beth said something in disagreement with what the girl said and a bunch of kids ganged up on her. At first she tried to argue her point but then she just got quiet and refused to talk. Anyway, I think she felt personally attacked, and I feel really bad that I couldn't talk to her when she came by after class."

"Whoa, that is so weird. Almost the same thing happened in my after-school session on Monday. Were you in the room when the kids were talking about racism in the media?" It struck me as uncanny that two events with so many parallels would happen back to back for Beth.

"No I didn't hear it, I was in a meeting when you all were having your group on Monday," Mr. Feldman reminded me.

"The kids were talking about racist depictions of Latinos and African Americans in the media. Then the conversation shifted to White teachers. One of the girls said White teachers at Live Oak do not understand Latino students' culture. Most of the other students were agreeing with her. Then Beth said something like,

'You can't generalize about all teachers.' She also said she has great teachers who make sure they know a lot about all of their students. I didn't think the others jumped down her throat or anything but they did continue talking about their perception that most White teachers are not interested in them and do not seem to care about them. I noticed that Beth got really quiet so I asked her about it after our session and she told me she thought the others were being unfair. She seemed very frustrated and even said that a lot of her teachers know more about her than her parents."

"That is interesting that that happened in your group and then the next day she had a similar interaction in my class," Mr. Feldman replied.

"You have probably noticed that Beth is the only White student in my group and that she always sits by herself. Well that is something that dates back to elementary school. She never quite fit in with the other girls. I feel worried about her because she seems so isolated and I am not sure how to get the group to accept her. I would like it if they were all friends but I don't know how to begin. But at least I want her to feel comfortable enough in my group so that she will feel free to voice her opinion." I was thinking out loud, hoping that Mr. Feldman might have some wisdom to impart to me on that front.

"I know what you mean. She has friends in the magnet and she is usually fine in my class. But she really stands out in class because most of the other kids are from really liberal families, and I have liberal political views too, so sometimes I have a hard time figuring out how to deal with it. Anyway, I don't want to see her upset. Will you please talk to her tomorrow and let me know how she's doing?"

I agreed to do what Mr. Feldman asked. I would talk to Beth the next day to make sure that she was not too disturbed by the dissonance and isolation she felt in the two experiences. When I hung up it occurred to me that Beth was right, she does have teachers who genuinely care about her and make an extra effort to get to know her. I wondered if the other participants in my study had teachers who would call in the evening on their behalf.

The next day in our after-school session the children worked in their small groups editing video footage for their projects. Beth planned to work independently and as usual she was seated in a chair separate from the other groups of participants. I sat down with her to talk and see how she had interpreted the events of the last few days.

"How are things going? Are you alright?" I asked as I plopped down next to her.

"Yeah," replied Beth looking confused by my question.

"'Cause Mr. Feldman called me last night and he said you had a hard day in class."

"Oh," now registering what I was talking about. " Well, after Monday's meeting with this group," shaking her head as she remembered her frustrations, "then on Tuesday in second-period Government there was a lot of Bush bashing so I was already upset when I went to English 1. Then Mr. Feldman put a prompt on the overhead that said, 'Only the educated are free.' This girl said power equals freedom and she said it had to do with money. I raised my hand and I said that I don't think

freedom exists, and that is when everyone started yelling at me and I stopped talking. It was like they were attacking me, and I just wanted to talk about ideas. Like in philosophy class we used to talk about ideas. I thought it was supposed to be like that."

"Well that must have felt harsh. Your statement probably really messed with people's ideas about reality, since freedom is such an important issue in this country," I replied, wondering if I was handling this as well as I could.

I could hear by the tone of her voice that Beth was still frustrated by her experiences. However, she seems so mature when she talks it can be hard to think of her as such a young person. When she interacts with me, and with other teachers, she displays a confidence that is uncommon in people her age. She claimed to be upset because the students in her class were not acting according to proper debate etiquette. However, I believe there was more to it than that. I think Beth does feel isolated when she is constantly on the other side of issues from her peers. In addition, in this particular occasion, what the other students were saying about White privilege and freedom strongly challenged Beth's paradigm of individual meritocracy.

It is interesting that the prompt in her English class on that particular day was worded the way it was. At that moment Beth had just come out of two educational experiences feeling silenced for her beliefs. She was already sensitive about voicing her conservative viewpoint about issues, because both in my session and in her Government class she experienced what she felt were personal attacks by students who held opposing views to hers. When she gave it another try in English class, she

again felt as if the whole class was ganging up on her and attacking her personally for her views. Adding to her feelings of being ostracized is the fact that she is 14 years old, a time when children feel tension of wanting to be seen as individuals while also wanting to fit into the group, wanting to be noticed while wanting to be left alone (Wood, 1997). I believe that Beth's feeling the tensions of being a teenager in addition to her frustrations at feeling silenced led her to make the statement that freedom does not exist.

Ironically, it was the pedagogical freedom that she experienced when a teacher gave a difficult and open-ended question to his class that led her to this statement and eventually to select this topic for the focus of her movie project in my study. White privilege has granted Beth a sense of agency in which she demands to be heard. It also blinds her to the possibility that people of color may not have the same societal or pedagogical freedoms that she enjoys.

The day after I met with Beth to talk about her experience in English class she sent me an e-mail indicating her plan for her movie project.

> Does freedom exist? I don't think it does and I have a few reasons to back that statement up, but it interests me and I want to know what other people have to say about that. It could be a debate, documentary, or even something like a thesis (Does Freedom Exist? Being the thesis idea—The statement: No).
>
> Potential scenes: Something maybe like the "truth" campaign, just getting people's ideas on the subject matter. I want to get some adult views and of course it would be totally voluntary because it is a delicate subject and just seeing what different people of different races, genders, ages, political parties, etc., have to say about it.

It is a testament to Beth's inquisitive nature that she did not approach the project in a bitter way with the intention of getting even with the other kids in class.

Rather than propose a movie that sets out only to convince people of her opinion, she intentionally designed her film to solicit diverse opinions. She stated in her e-mail that she wanted to get views from "different people of different races, genders, ages, political parties." This, in my opinion, shows a high degree of sophistication and distinguishes her from many White teenagers who view "Whiteness" as being "normal" and seem unaware that race, class, and gender are significant factors in determining people's worldviews (Perry, 2002). It also sets her apart from the makers of *A Day at School* who only talked to people like themselves, people likely to share their viewpoint.

Although Beth never finished editing her video into a final product, she conducted eight interviews with a variety of people including her father, a family friend, workers at an after-school daycare where her siblings spend time, a waitress, and the owner of a local Chinese restaurant. She explained that she was trying to get diverse perspectives by asking men and women from different nationalities. Of the eight people she interviewed, half were men and half women. Three of the men were White and one was Asian American; two of the women were White and two were Asian and had immigrated to the United States as adults.

It was my hope that Beth would have a transformative experience while making this movie. I imagined her scratching the surface of the construct of societal freedom and exposing hegemony. By talking to people with diverse backgrounds I imagined she would find that all people living in America do not view freedom in the same way. Specifically, I imagined that she would find that race plays a large role in

people's beliefs about a level playing field that is essential for the construct of meritocracy. However, this did not happen; her moviemaking experience seemed to reinforce her views about meritocracy in the United States. When talking about the process she said, "I see that a lot of people think the same way—a lot of people you wouldn't normally think would think the same way. But a lot of people aren't different." In the following transcript she describes how the different people she interviewed shared similar views.

> My dad, and Dominique [the waitress at the Chinese restaurant], and Brian [day-care worker], they all had the same views. [They thought] that freedom did exist but not really, I guess. Like it did exist, but it was hard to achieve. You choose your own freedom, but freedom can be taken away from you through schools and through institution-type things or through laws and politics and media. Even though it looks like it might add to your freedom, it takes away from it.

Her own stated view was that freedom does not exist. This is what she said in English class and what led her to make the movie. It would seem that her interviewees both confirmed and rejected her thesis. On one hand they stated that people "choose" their freedom, but they acknowledged that society and institutions limit it. Beth explained this fits into her own beliefs on the matter of freedom.

> I had never thought about it before; I guess I took my freedom for granted until I thought about it. When I started to think about the subject I began to realize that it is a major thing and we are probably the only people who actually really have it—or in the best form. Or the biggest form at least. Or the most powerful form. And then I figured how all of these people who have grown up with freedom and how they felt about it ,and all these people who didn't grow up with freedom, how did they feel about it?

Although she asserted that there is no "pure freedom," and this led her to state that freedom does not exist, the closest thing to it is life in the United States. Her

research seemed to confirm her beliefs in individual meritocracy and the freedom Americans are granted. It is interesting to note that the critique of Beth's conservative perspective arose in class when an Asian American girl equated race and power to freedom. What she said that made Beth upset was that White people have more freedom in the United States because of racism and White privilege. Similar to the comments made by this student, the participants in the previous day's discussion in our after-school session pointed to the unfair constraints of societal racism. Her experience being exposed to both of these perspectives was the catalyst for pursuing the topic. Unfortunately, a treatment of this subject was absent from her movie efforts. For Beth to acknowledge the possibility that in our society there is more freedom for some than for others, and she is one of the people who benefits from this inequality, would go too strongly against her deeply held beliefs in meritocracy. Such a treatment would force her to question the foundation of her understanding of our American democracy.

What Is at Stake?

In this part of the chapter we have seen how Beth views freedom. The only White participant in the study, Beth was also the only critic of the movie *A Day at School*. She objected to the thesis of the movie that claimed school is boring. Beth does not agree with this statement, in fact she loves school and claims her friends feel the same way as her. She also reported experiencing pedagogical freedom, which is corroborated by the fact that her choice for a movie project was an extension of an

open-ended discussion in her English class. Beth views pedagogical freedom within a larger framework of meritocracy. In other words, she believes people in society are free agents who have a choice: If they want to work hard they can succeed. This, in her opinion, is true for students at school: If they apply themselves and work hard they will be rewarded. Like her father has taught her, "You corrupt the very thought of freedom if you abuse it." In Beth's mind this is exactly what the students at Live Oak who are not engaged in school are doing. She considers these students ungrateful; they, like she said of herself before she started her investigation on societal freedom, "take their freedom for granted."

Beth showed a very strong belief in the ideals of democracy in the United States. Her conservative worldview is mirrored in her outlook on schooling and meritocracy. She buys into the system that asserts a level playing field where those who work hard come out ahead. Her life story corroborates this ideal. It would not be surprising if Beth were a disengaged student and felt school was mismatched from her personal experience. Given her working-class background, having been moved back and forth between her parents' houses, and the adult responsibilities she has assumed both with her younger siblings and her parents' relationships, from a critical perspective it would be logical to predict that school would not be a fit for her (McLaren, 1994). Any one of the mentioned attributes of Beth's life could easily place her at risk of dropping out.

Additionally, school is not always a cozy place for her and it seems even more likely she would experience difficulties in school. Though she is engaged in class, she

is often at odds with many of her peers because of her worldview. This causes intellectual conflict and dissonance for her as was illustrated by her frustration in the English class discussion.

Middle school is often considered an educational crossroads because it is a time when many students lose interest in school. Feelings of self-doubt are common in early adolescence, especially for girls, and this can contribute to young people's disengagement with academics. In addition, the heightened importance of peer-group acceptance is often elevated above academic concerns (Perry, 2002). These issues add to the precariousness of Beth's situation and potentially lead to school alienation.

In spite of the obstacles, Beth is a success story. School experiences for her are characterized by goodness of fit even with her working-class background. She has teachers who are genuinely concerned for her as an individual and by her own account, "know more about [her] than her parents do." One even went so far as to call my house when Beth had a bad day in his class. Although she does not agree with her peers on political issues, which at times creates intellectual dissonance for her, she has channels for expressing her frustrations. The channels, like talking to teachers or creating a movie to research societal freedom, are open to her because at the root Beth has a steadfast belief in the educational system that is based in democratic ideals and meritocracy. Her own experiences corroborate and strengthen this belief. She is well suited for the nature of school. She is bright and works hard. This pays off for her, and she experiences success as the fruit of her labor. In turn, her rewards confirm her steadfast belief in the meritocracy of school.

What Beth seems to be missing out on is that a large number of children at her school do not experience pedagogical and societal freedom in the same way as she. For the many students of color at Live Oak, school and society do not offer the same hope that it does for Beth, and this is reflected in their outlooks on the future and their buy-in to the educational system. The issue was touched upon in Beth's English class discussion, and it caused Beth some grief. Even with occasional attention to issues such as racism, Beth is able to get by in school with her belief in the level playing field of meritocracy unscathed. What this means is that Beth is missing out on the opportunity to learn from a great many students of color who share the halls with her but experience school in a much different way.

Pedagogical Freedom and Societal Freedom

Beth's views on societal freedom allow her to buy into the educational system and in turn to experience pedagogical freedom and feel engaged in school. This is a view that does not seem to be shared by the children of color who participated in my study. In this chapter we see how young people can perceive the same school experiences in very different ways. It seems that race places a large role in determining how children interpret and experience schooling.

Beth and her perceptions of schooling are shaped by her Whiteness. More specifically, Beth's experiences at school are characterized by goodness of fit. The structures of school seem to fit nicely into her life and her belief system. As has been pointed out by many researchers (for example, Cummins, 1986/2001; Delpit, 1995;

Ladson-Billings, 1995; Scheurich & Young, 1997), schools are often culturally congruent with the culture of White students but not with those of students of color.

Although she may feel isolated and even silenced at times, Beth shows a strong sense of agency, confidence, and an undergirding belief in the value of school in her life. This is evident by the way she discussed the issue of pedagogical freedom as well as in her efforts to address the theme of societal freedom when it came up in her English class discussion. The fact that school fits her so well leads her to understand freedom and meritocracy as just common sense. The other participants did not seem to share this degree of agency when talking about their school experiences. This was illustrated by their agreement on Bernice's assertions that "kids are the ones who make school fun" by getting in trouble. They did not see that they had the power to take responsibility for making school not be boring. They perceived that teachers can make school "fun" or "boring," and their own "choices" are simply to engage or resist.

It could be argued that Beth experiences a great deal of pedagogical freedom because she is in the magnet program, and advanced academic tracks often allow students more freedom through higher level thinking activities. However, this would not explain why she feels this freedom when other participants (Bernice, Ines, Sonia, and Thalía), who are also in the magnet program and even in many of the same classes, do not. The fact that they have the same amount of pedagogical freedom but perceive it so differently is hugely related to Beth's being White. Beth's notions of

societal freedom and the supporting constructs of meritocracy and school as a "great equalizer" stem from a freedom that comes with privilege and opportunity.

Out of the 5 participants who went to the magnet in middle school, only Beth is continuing on to a magnet high school. She is also the only one who claims to like school. All 5 of these girls, plus Jaqueline who elected not to go to the magnet at Live Oak but is in the honors program, were highly successful elementary students. What has happened in the last 3 years that has caused all of the students of color to lose interest in being-high achieving students?

Tatum (1997) defined racism as a systematic favoring of one group of people over others based on race. Schools in the United States serve White children like Beth better than they do children of color because of "goodness of fit." This is the definition of racism (Scheurich & Young, 1997). My participants through their commentary on freedom in school demonstrated they perceive the same school experiences in very different ways. The children of color are largely alienated in school and do not see purpose or relevance of what they are asked to do with their lives. Beth may not always feel cozy in school, but she is intellectually engaged and driven to succeed and has avenues to deal with her frustrations when they arise. This is the school experience that all students should have; however, it does not seem to be the experience of the children of color who participated in my study.

It is not acceptable for schools to be places where White students feel free but children of color feel mismatched from their lives. If this is the case, schools are active participants in failing a large number of our children. We must strive to find

ways to make schools fit all children in much the same way they fit children like Beth.

The next chapter further examines the issues of race and ethnicity by looking at students' perspectives on the subject. When race was addressed in our sessions, it became evident that it is on many of their minds and relates to students' feelings about engagement in schooling. The next chapter discusses specifically how my participants talked about race and ethnicity as important factors in society and in schooling.

Chapter 6

Race and Ethnicity

In the preceding chapter I discussed middle school students' perceptions of freedom. I separated two categories of freedom that I called societal freedom and pedagogical freedom. The views of my participants about their experiences in relation to these constructs seemed to be heavily influenced by race and ethnicity. In this chapter I look at how these middle school students talked about race and ethnicity and examine their views about issues such as racism and racial and ethnic group identification. I describe discussions by my participants about race and racism in mainstream media, teachers and culturally relevant pedagogy, and their ideas about what can be done about the problem of racism in our society. Next, I discuss a movie made by 3 of my participants that sparked discussions about the way social groups at Live Oak are typically formed along racial and ethnic lines. The chapter ends with a discussion of the importance of discussing issues of race and ethnicity with middle school students.

Listening to Students Talk About Ethnicity and Race

Why in the movies, why do the White people always have to be the smartest ones?
— Joe in Session 10

One way to listen to students is to focus on the kinds of issues they live with every day. For children of color in the United States, these issues include poverty,

racism, discrimination, and alienation (Nieto, 1999). While these are salient topics for students, adults in the school context rarely mention them. Nieto (1999) listed some possible reasons such issues are often avoided in schools, suggesting that the silence is probably a combination of all of these factors:

- The majority of teachers in the United States are white Americans who are uncomfortable or unaccustomed to discussing these issues.
- Admitting that they exist challenges their most cherished ideals of democracy and equality.
- It has to do with the tradition of presenting information in classrooms as if it were free of conflict and controversy
- Teachers are afraid of opening contentious discussions by involving students in debating such "hot topics." (pp. 194-195)

Although racism is a sensitive topic, it should not be avoided in the classroom. All children need opportunities to discuss racism and deconstruct hegemonic views with the help of adults. Tatum (1999) told a story about how her own son made a comment based on a racial stereotype about an African American youth while they were driving in an urban neighborhood. Tatum, who is African American and a scholar in the field of racial identity development, did not shy away from issues of racism while raising her son. In fact, she was acutely aware of the prevalence of racism in our society; sensitive to the damaging possibilities for her son, she openly dialogued with him from a young age so he would feel pride in his culture. Despite all of her efforts to combat stereotypes, they still crept in. She questioned her son about it and discussed it with him to try to help him recognize the unfair assumptions he made based on a young man's race. According to Tatum, her son knows that these images

are not an accurate depiction of him, but she has to help him see that they are also a distorted image of his urban peers.

Adolescence is a perfect time for students to learn to question the racism that is so prevalent in our society. Adolescence is a time when children are already exploring the issue of identity (McDaniel et al., 2001). In addition, adolescents have a strong sense of fairness and idealism, and are interested in finding positive alternatives to discrimination and prejudice. McDaniel et al. (2001) wrote, "Middle level students seem 'ripe' for school contexts that support a communal vision as well as instructional and curricular experiences directed at social justice" (p. 60). This is especially true for children of color who are constantly reminded by the forces of dominant society that they are different from what is considered "normal" (Tatum, 1999). As young people attempt to answer the question, "Who am I?" they are being told by media, schooling, and other sources that people like them are a certain way.

My interactions with my participants supported the claims made by the mentioned researchers. My participants were thinking about issues such as racism and were eager to talk about them. I sought to obtain from my participants their impressions about racism in mainstream media. I asked them about how the media generally depicts Mexicans and African Americans. Not surprisingly, they were quite aware of the negative depictions of people of color prevalent in Hollywood movies. The following segment of transcript is an example of what they said:

> Me: How does the media generally depict, or represent, Mexicans and African Americans?
> Thalía: Poor.

Me: What else?
Joe: Mexicans are usually gangsters or something.
Bernice: They have weapons, knives.

Thalía, Joe and Bernice expressed some common stereotypes of people of color that are found in mainstream media. Not only are they aware of the negative stereotypes, they also see that these depictions are not a fair representation of them or their peers. In Session 8 we watched a segment from the movie *Dangerous Minds.* In the scene we watched a new teacher, a White woman, show up for her first day of class at a high school. Her class is comprised of basically all African American and Latino students. The students are loud and do not pay attention to the teacher. When she tries to get their attention they talk back to her and continue to socialize with their peers. At one point she walks out of the room and looks into a class across the hall. In this room a class of mostly White students is quiet and paying attention to the male teacher who stands in front of the chalkboard. She looks frustrated and goes back to her class to give it another try. Finally, she is able to get some control by appealing to their desire to fight. She does this by abandoning a traditional teacher role and demonstrating her karate skills.

This scene is quite typical of Hollywood depictions of classrooms where a White teacher through heroic conviction and unorthodox methods struggles to reign in out-of-control and violent children of color. The participants agreed that this scene was not realistic. I asked them why they thought classrooms were depicted that way in the movie. This is what they said:

Me: Why do you think that the classrooms are depicted that way in the movie?

Joe: Remember what we said earlier like Mexican kids and Black kids are the troubled kids and the gangsters and stuff like that?
Me: Right, and that's fairly stereotypical of what you might see in the media.
Joe: Yeah, but I'm Mexican, she's Mexican, she's Mexican—
Tony: We are all Mexican except for DeAndre.
Joe: And Beth.
Tony: We have every type!
Joe: Almost all of us are not that hyper. None of us are like that (he points to the TV).
Me: That's goes back to what Bernice was talking about how people are different and have a lot of different aspects and there kind of showing a very superficial view kind of based on—
Joe: Racist
Me: Thank you, yes, racism, good word.
Bernice: Yeah, racist. They are being racist there, because there wasn't any White people in that class. I didn't see any White people except the teacher. But like troublemakers—
DeAndre: Mexican kids
Bernice: And actually, the Mexicans in this school—they're not really the troublemakers.

Joe pointed out that this movie is a good example of the way media frame children of color as "troubled" and "gangsters." He then connected that image to the participants in our group who are mostly Mexican and Mexican American children. None of them act in ways that are consistent with the images shown in the film, such as being "hyper." Bernice corroborated his story and added that the image from the film does not represent Mexican American kids at Live Oak, who for the most part are not troublemakers. For Joe and Bernice, the scene from *Dangerous Minds* is an example of racism in mainstream movies.

Stereotypical depictions of children of color like the one described in the movie *Dangerous Minds* influence people's perceptions of others and even of themselves (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999; Tatum, 1999). In Session 10 we revisited

the theme of racism in mainstream media. Joe stated that movies have the potential to influence the way people think. He believes that movies that show a one-sided view of people from a certain race or ethnicity lead people to develop racist attitudes about those groups of people. He used *Dangerous Minds* as an example. He objected to the way the two classrooms were shown, because the one with all White kids was shown as well behaved and the one with Mexican American and African American students was shown as acting bad. He argued with Tony, who claimed that it is a fair representation if the kids choose to act that way. Here is what they said:

> Me: Do you think that is a fair representation of Mexican and African American youth?
> Tony: Well they choose that way to be.
> Joe: No, it's not fair though.
> Tony: It is fair; they act like it.
> Joe: I don't think it's fair because not all Mexican or Black race people act like that.

It was unclear if Tony was just playing the devil's advocate, was trying to be funny, or believes that it is a fair representation. Joe clearly felt strongly that moviemakers have a responsibility to show a well-rounded view of people from different races and ethnicities. Later, in the same conversation, Tony tried again to justify his position that it was fair to represent African Americans and Latinos as wild and violent.

> Tony: I said yes, because it's the way they act.
> Joe: What! Not all of us. Are you a gangster? Do you carry weapons?
> Tony: No
> Joe: Do you do any of the stuff we are talking about? Except for being crazy.
> Tony: (laughing) No, I disagree.

Once Joe made the connection personal, Tony changed his original position. Joe again pointed out that not all Latino kids act like gangsters. Tony is one example.

Even if Tony believed that depictions in mainstream media are fair when they show children of color as wild and violent, he had to agree that not all African American and Latino children act this way. He had to concede to Joe's argument.

Societal Racism

I asked the group why they thought the media depicted children of color in stereotypical ways. Joe speculated that some of the people who make movies are racist. Ines stated the possibility that African American and Latino people sometimes are reacting to racism and act out in self-defense. She said,

> I think that African American or Hispanic people get more mad when people are racist to them. So like, there is some Mexicans that don't like White people because they think that White people think they are better than us, or racist, so that's why they don't like them. And that's why they act all bad against them.
>
> For example, I know people who don't like White people at all because they think that White people think that they are better than them. And because they know that sometimes they can be racist and then call them names like wetback or something like that, and they get mad, and that's when they start being really violent against them.

Both Joe and Ines pointed to racism as the reason for negative depictions of children of color in the media. Joe's argument places responsibility solely on the moviemakers because they make one-sided portraits. Joe knows there are many more examples of children of color who are not violent gangsters than there are examples of regular children who do regular things like he does. According to Joe, the responsible thing to do would be to give a well-rounded picture and not feed the stereotypes about children of color. Ines argued that some children of color do act

violent, but she was careful to explain the reasoning for their behavior, a defensive reaction to racism. It seemed that she was saying that the movies may depict children of color as violent, but they should then explain that the children act this way because White society is violent towards them.

The arguments of both children point to societal racism (Scheurich, 2002), a concept that is more abstract than individual racism. The children seem to have the opinion that power is uneven and that dominant society is run by and for White people. This concept is a direct challenge to the very core of the cherished ideals of democracy and equality in the United States (Tatum, 1992).

Tatum (1997) pointed out that it is hard for White students to understand and be empathetic towards children of color when children of color experience racism. Similarly, Delpit (1995) stated, "Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence" (p. 26). Interestingly, Beth, the only White participant in my study, seemed to hold tightly to notions of meritocracy and free choice. When she discussed the movie *Dangerous Minds* she did not address the issue of racism directly, but she maintained that the moviemakers have a right to portray the students how they want. In her view anyone else would have an equal right to show something different. Here is what she said:

> Beth: Well, some kids do act like that and if that's who they want to portray, then that's who they are going to portray.
> Me: OK, but you agree that it is pretty limited.
> Beth: Well, that's what they wanted to show. So they did. If someone else wants to show something different, they can. It's all a matter of choice.

For Beth the fact that the movie chose to show Latino and African American children as wild and as troublemakers was "all a matter of choice." She did not acknowledge, or did not see, the possibility that societal racism creates a structure that allows certain messages to get heard and others to remain silenced. Joe tried to argue that moviemakers should have a responsibility to give a fuller representation. Beth countered Joe's position by pointing out that *Dangerous Minds* was simply a true story from one teacher's perspective and therefore had a right to show things from her point of view.

Joe's argument was based on his frustration with an entire system that only seems to allow these types of perspectives to be shown. Beth argued from a perspective that views a level playing field where any story can be shown. They talked to each other and were frustrated by the other's lack of ability to understand their position.

> Beth: Well, if a movie is made to produce a point, then you have to back up your point.
> Me: So it's kind of a teacher perspective kind of a movie. And *Dangerous Minds* was a book that was written by this teacher, so it was based on a teacher's perspective and her first year teaching.
> Joe: And she was White. Why couldn't it be a Mexican or a Black person—
> Beth: Because she's the one it happened to, and she's the one who was writing the story, and that's what she was trying to portray.
> Me: OK
> Joe: But why did it have to be her? (He turns around and looks at Beth)
> Beth: Because it was about her. She wrote it.
> Joe: Couldn't it be about someone else?
> B: If someone else wrote it and made a movie about it. It could happen.
> (Pause)
> Me: (to Joe) Keep going. I want to hear what you have to say.
> Joe: I just lost my train of thought.

Me: Does anyone want to help Joe? (silence) Do you find it odd that of all the teachers there are in the whole—
Joe: Yeah, in the whole world, why did it have to be that one White teacher?

The argument was passionate on both sides. It was not a coincidence that Beth is a White magnet student and Joe is Latino and in the regular track of the comprehensive school. For each, their daily experiences in and outside of school certainly send them the messages they used to base their arguments. For Beth it is one of individual meritocracy and freedom to express ideas. Not only is this a concept that is the backbone of dominant, White society in the U.S. democracy, it is also a construct that is strongly reinforced for her as a magnet student. She is on the highest track at this school. In her classes she is asked to voice her opinions, and space is made in the curriculum for her to do so. In addition, the very fact that she is in the program communicates to her that her hard work gives her access to a better education.

Joe on the other hand does not seem to buy into the notion of individual meritocracy. His argument questions the purported freedom that is fundamental for democracy. He does not doubt that the movie is based on a true story of a White teacher; he questions why the story was made about her and not about a teacher of color. He knows the answer but he cannot get Beth to see it. For Joe the answer is clearly that there is not a level playing field, and in dominant society stories about White teacher-heroes are acceptable, whereas those by and about people of color are not.

They continued to argue, and Jaqueline tried to appease the situation. She did not like conflict and wanted to find a solution that would make them happy. Her solution did not make Joe happy because she was making light of an issue that made Joe frustrated. Her solution was a pretty rational kind of argument but treated the problem with a band-aid rather than getting at the root of the problem.

> Beth: (some frustration in her voice) Because that is what the book is based on. Because that's what really happened so that's what they wanted to show.
> Joe: Why did the book have to be based on that one person, too—
> Beth: (slamming her hands on the table) Because it was written by the person who it happened to, who just happened to be a White teacher.
> Me: (to Joe) But that's frustrating to you, right?
> (Joe nods yes)
> Jaqueline: Alright, the next movie we make, we'll make a Hispanic. Happy?
> Joe: (slams his hands on the table) NO.
> Jaqueline: OK, we'll make it White.
> Me: But, do you see what Joe is saying though? He has a really valid point. And that is that it is always about a White person.
> Ines: But see, if it was always all about Mexicans, then White people would feel the same way.

White people are often unaware of the privilege associated with being White in our society (McIntosh, 1988). For Beth the story was about a teacher who just happened to be White. Joe saw it as a story that was told only because the teacher was White. The positions of all of the children involved are understandable. From the standpoint of dominant, middle-class values, we live in a democracy where everyone is free and equal. It is just common sense that a movie based on one White teacher's perspective is simply that: a movie about one person's perspective. Beth did not understand Joe's frustration with this point. So his question of why did it have to be a White teacher must have seemed ridiculous, since a White teacher wrote the book.

Joe's question did not seem ridiculous to Ines. She had an answer to it that directly addressed societal racism and White privilege. Ines said,

> Like I, she [Beth] said the one person wrote the book, right? And then they probably picked that one because it was good. But I bet you that if there was a Mexican who wrote exactly the same kind of book and it was good, I bet you they would pick the White person's instead of the Mexican's.

Ines and Joe questioned the existence of a level playing field and understand that racism allows White people's voices to be heard above all others. Ines pointed out that she did not think it would be fair if the reverse were true. White people would not appreciate it if all they ever saw were representations from the perspective of Mexicans. This led her to think about what she sees on television. Her comment started a conversation about racism in television.

> Ines: You see more White people on television. You see the commercials and stuff and everything, and they are usually a whole bunch of White people and just one little African American in the middle. (people laugh) But it's true. And you only see Mexicans really on the Spanish channel.
> Jaqueline: Then watch the Spanish shows and be happy.
> Ines: But I don't like the Spanish shows.
> Me: (to Jacqueline) Do you think—You don't think they have a right to be upset that—
> Jacqueline: They do but—
> Ines: There's only one Spanish—there's only two Spanish shows out of the whole thing and out of like 70 channels, man, there's only like two or three, why?
> Joe: Actually there's five. (laughs)
> Ines: Whatever
> Me: No, but her point is—
> Ines: There's only a little bit compared to whew. And there's only one Black channel and it's BET and that's the Black Entertainment Tonight. Yeah, there's only one Black channel and there's like five Mexican and the rest of them are all White.
> Joe: And there's like a million-kazillion White channels.
> Beth: Well, if you think about it. Most people can speak English—
> Ines: (a disbelieving look on her face) Ri-iiight

(Joe looks like he wants to say something)
Beth: —And understand it.
Me: But if you think about it that is a different topic. 'Cause English is a language, it's not a race, or a cultural—
Jaqueline: Say if Mexicans were doing all of this. What if all the White people would say, "Ugh, I'm sick of watching Mexicans," just like (inaudible).
Me: Would it be bad of them to feel that way?
Joe: Yeah, it would be bad.
Ines: I think they should split it in half. Half the channels should be—they should mix it up. Don't just leave it with one race. They should just mix it all up with different people—with Chinese people—with Asian people—
Joe: Except for at the same time they have to—
Jaqueline: They have Chinese stations.
Ines: (laughs) I know I see that, I'm like "What?"
Me: Joe is in the middle of something.
Joe: Uhh, OK now I remember, that's—(he holds his head like he can't remember)
Me: Come on, you are like the one who has instigated this whole great discussion.
Jaqueline: Because he's the only boy here.
Ines: Think of the thing you were saying about—about Mexicans—
Joe: Oh yeah, it's kind of, they try to not make enough Spanish channels on this side of the border you know why? Even though there is a lot of Mexicans. The, they mostly like to not—uhhh—
I: They don't like to include them.
Joe: Yeah.
Me: When you guys say "they," who are you talking about?
Ines: The race: White. The people who are in control of the TV. And most of them are White, and I don't know what they think but probably they don't like to include Mexicans that much.

Ines and Joe expressed feelings that it is unfair that there are so many television channels and the vast majority are what they referred to as "White" channels. They meant that television mostly shows White people, except for the occasional token African American or Latino, and cater to what are deemed White interests. Jaqueline again tried to avoid conflict and make everyone happy by suggesting they watch the Spanish channels if they want to see Latino people. Ines

and Joe do not want to watch the Spanish channels; they want to be represented in mainstream English language channels. Beth misunderstood what they meant by "White channels." She assumed they were referring to the language spoken, and she stated, "Most people can speak English." They were not talking about the language of the broadcasting; they were talking about who has the power to determine what gets shown. This became more clear when they discussed the lack of Spanish channels. Joe said that White people do not want to allow Spanish channels in the United States, even though there are many people who would watch them. Ines finished his thought by explaining that White people are the ones who "control the TV." Racism on a societal level creates an atmosphere where students of color are forced to choose among channels they view as "White" because they do not see themselves represented in the people who appear on the screen. Otherwise they must watch a limited number of channels that cater to specific groups, like BET or the channels in Spanish.

Ines and Joe were articulate about the impact of societal racism on their daily lives. They are frustrated with what they view to be racism apparent every time they turn on the television. The other students were not as verbal about their perceptions of these issues. It is not that they do not notice it; for example, Jaqueline pointed out that they can watch Spanish language channels if they want to see Latinos on the television. Perhaps the other participants were not as verbal about the problem because they do not have language to deconstruct the images they are seeing daily. Beth may never have considered the possibility that there is not equal opportunity for

anyone's story to be told through a book or a movie. Tony may believe that Mexican American children act violent and wild so it is fair to show them being that way, because the pervasiveness of these sorts of images have trumped even his own analysis of his daily interactions with his friends and his family.

Regardless of a child's race or ethnicity, there is value in openly discussing the negative effects of stereotyping in mainstream media. What better place than school for having these discussions? School is a place where students are exposed to difference. Students can interact daily with peers, teachers, and curricula that offer different perspectives then their own. School is a perfect place for issues such as societal racism to be contextualized and analyzed. Then perhaps school might play a role in affirming diversity rather than reproducing the status quo.

Teachers and Culturally Relevant Curriculum

If teachers ignore issues that are important to the students, such as racism, school is not meeting the needs of the students (Kohl, 1994; Nieto, 1999). A crucial part of creating effective environments in school for all children is a caring relationship between the teacher and the students (Noddings, 1984). A great deal of research points to the importance of caring relationships between teachers and students of color (see for example Valenzuela, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Olsen, 1997; Powell, 2001). This is particularly important because the vast majority of teachers in the United States are White (Marx, 2003), and White teachers often do not

address issues such as racism (Sleeter, 1994). Nieto (1999) pointed out the frequent mismatch between the students' cultures and the content of the curriculum.

> In fact, in many schools learning starts not with what students bring but with what is considered high-status knowledge, with its overemphasis on European and European-American history, arts, and values. Without denying the importance of providing all students with the high-status knowledge that can open doors to otherwise unavailable life options for them, the case still needs to be made that it makes sense to begin with what students know. (p. 194)

Most teachers in the United States are White and from middle-class backgrounds (Marx, 2003). Yet, students of color are rapidly becoming a majority of the student populations in public schools (Kohl, 1994). In Session 5 I asked the participants if most of the teachers at Live Oak are White. This is important because, as Tatum (1999) pointed out, students need positive role models of color so that they do not see school success as "acting White" (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In addition, it can be difficult for teachers to affirm the culture of students from communities to which they do not belong themselves (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999). Although not all of the teachers at Live Oak are White, a large percentage of them are, as was pointed out in the following transcript from Session 5:

> Me: Are most of the teachers here White?
> Chorus of voices: No
> DeAndre: Well, yes.
> Tony: Well there's Mexican—
> DeAndre: It looks like in this school we only have one Black person and that's Coach Flemming.
> Sonia: No, there's Mr. Gray
> Fransisco: What's that other dude's name?
> DeAndre: Mr. Frank and that's it.
> Sonia: What about Mexican people? There aren't many Mexican people.
> Ines: There's Ms. de la Fuente . . . she talks about . . .

(Here a number of people start talking. Ines is saying something about the "Mexican" teachers' focus in terms of curriculum, like Mexican history. Other kids are naming some other teachers.)
Bernice: There are no Mexican teachers. (I think she is referring to nationality rather than ethnicity here.)
Me: OK, so there are more Mexican American or Latino teachers—
Sonia: (laughs) No, there's more White.
Me: Like a whole lot more?
Sonia: Yes

There are so few teachers of color the students were able to name them and began to do so. DeAndre, who is African American, seemed concerned that there were so few Black teachers. With help he could think of only three. Sonia and the others seemed to concern themselves more with "Mexican" teachers. Perhaps the students identify with teachers who come from similar racial or ethnic backgrounds to theirs. I asked the participants if they felt the lack of teachers of color affects their school experience.

Me: (to everyone) Do you think that affects the way school is?
Many voices: Yes.
Ines: Like, I have this Mexican teacher, who, like, she doesn't care about the American Revolution because it's too short. She cares more about Mexico and all that stuff. She doesn't care about America. (laughs) No, I'm serious. She said she didn't care about that—
Bernice: She said for her it was really boring.
Ines: Yeah, and like White teachers they care a lot about America and they don't really talk about Mexico.
Sonia: So that does affect our learning—(a lot of voices)—'cause if you're in a U.S. history class and it's a White teacher and they only care about America. They only teach about America—

The students of color do believe school is affected by the race or ethnicity of their teachers. Ines, Sonia, and Bernice related a story about how the content of the classes can be different depending on the ethnicity of the teacher. In their example a

"Mexican" teacher prefers teaching about Mexico and Mexican history to teaching the American Revolution. It seems that the teacher in this case is trying to raise the critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) of her students. She is trying to capture students' interest in a culturally relevant way by tailoring the content of the instruction to connect with the background culture of many of her students. Kohl (1994) described the alienation felt by many Latino students and families from a history curriculum that addressed Texas history solely from the standpoint of an Anglo-European perspective; this perspective negated the rich history tied directly to the home cultures of the many Chicano students in the school. Broadening the definition of history beyond a focus on Anglo-European history to include what is often left out of the traditional curriculum is aligned with the philosophy espoused by advocates of multicultural education (Banks & Banks, 1995). Sonia, Bernice, and Ines seemed to appreciate this and to look at it favorably compared to what their experience deemed most White teachers might do. The participants established that they believe that Latino teachers teach about content that is more relevant to the Latino students.

In the next segment from the conversation Bernice talked about a White teacher who is an exception to the rule. Some White teachers try to teach culturally relevant content, and my participants of color seemed to appreciate that.

> Bernice: And we had Mr.—well, I had Mr. Burns last year, and he would say we need to learn more about—
> Sonia: Our own culture, yeah. And that's what we did. Last year we talked a lot about Mexico. Even though he was *white*. But he understood.
> Bernice: Yeah.
> Me: Really?
> Bernice: Yeah.

(others agree)
Me: Why do you think that is? Why do you think he understands? And not other teachers?
Sonia: Because, maybe he looks at the school and how many people, like there's a lot of Mexican people here.
Me: And so, do you think that's a more effective style of teaching?
Sonia: Yeah.
Me: And that the students were more engaged in what they were doing?
Sonia: Yeah.

Mr. Burns, according to Sonia and Bernice, is a White teacher who seems to understand his Latino students. He told the kids they should learn about their own cultures and that was reflected in the curriculum of his class. When asked why he might feel that way, Sonia thought that he must have noticed that most of the students are Mexican and realized this would be more relevant for them. The students' observations are based on personal experience, but they are strikingly aligned with research about culturally relevant pedagogy. Teachers who are successful with children from oppressed communities actively affirm the cultures, languages, and communities of those children (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lucas, Henze, & Donato, 1990; Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999; Valenzuela, 1999).

When my participants were in seventh grade and I was doing a pilot for this study I followed Sonia through the course of her school day for 2 weeks. I had the opportunity to observe Mr. Burns' social studies class and see what the children were referring to when they mentioned him as a White teacher who cared and taught about "their culture." The following vignette describes a lesson I observed in Mr. Burns' class. The lesson dealt with the Spanish colonization of Mexico and illustrates both the content and style this teacher uses to reach his students.

I arrived at Mr. Burns' social studies class with the rest of the students. He was standing at the door dressed in a black monk's robe. The hood was pulled over his head and you couldn't see his face. He greeted each child who entered with, "O-pah-ka."

All of the chairs had been pushed to the periphery of the room. The kids were visually excited as they took seats on the floor in the center of the classroom. The windows were covered with black curtains that had colorful symbols in their centers. The lights were off. The daily agenda was on the board as usual; however, it was written in strange, indecipherable symbols. Gregorian monk music wafted through the air.

Once all of the students assembled on the floor the teacher started to speak. He talked in a loud voice in an unknown language of guttural tones. A girl called out, "That's not how you say sit down *in Spanish." The highly engaged class concurred with animated shouts and gestures at the teacher. One student stood up and the teacher gave him a piece of paper. As the teacher talked, the student read a translation of what he was saying. The first thing he said was, "This is not Spanish." This teacher, who knows his students, had anticipated what the children would be thinking. Next the teacher grouped the children with grunts and hand gestures. The translator relayed the message that they were to follow the instructions from this missionary monk.*

The class divided into five groups, and each went to a separate center. One group went to a meditation center. They were instructed to lie back in the chairs,

close their eyes, and meditate. Another group sat on a black sheet that was laid out on the floor and were instructed to pray. They had to hold their hands in clenched fists in front of them and chant, "Jo Jo, Oreo, Spaghetti-o," repeatedly. A third group was at a "work" center. They were told to stack heavy books into a pile on the floor. The fourth group had to copy pages from very thick books. The final group at the "farm work" station had to arrange seeds in rows.

The teacher walked around as the groups did their work. He yelled at them in the strange language. He held a stick and often slapped it hard against chairs or the floor. When he did this he communicated the fact that he was angry at their performance on the various tasks.

I watched a group of children engaged in "farm work." The instructions read, "Place seeds in four rows. Exactly 17 seeds in each row." The students appeared confident that the task would be a breeze. From the satisfied looks on their faces it seemed that they were pleased with themselves for their quick work. That was until the teacher approached and immediately started talking and gesturing. Although they could not understand his words, it was apparent that they had done the work wrong. They tried to decipher his words as they rearranged the seeds and asked questions. The teacher replied with a loud, "TSST," indicating that they were not permitted to speak. A boy in the group tried to fix the problem. He tried verbally to interpret the teacher's gestures. He must have forgotten that speaking was not permitted, and the teacher sent him out of the room "to the wolves" as punishment.

Slowly the kids seemed to be catching on. After a while the groups were getting yelled at less and less. The teacher even gave the "thumbs up" sign to one of the groups. Sonia's group rotated next to the "work" station. The instructions told them they must clean up the paper and then move the books to the next number. They stacked the large heavy books on a piece of numbered construction paper. The teacher came by and scolded them, apparently for not making the pile straight enough. In the copying center each student got a Handbook of Texas*, a very dense book with small print. The instructions directed students to copy as many lines as possible. The kids got right to work recording sentence after sentence. A boy in Sonia's group sighed and said, "I'm tired." A girl replied with, "This is boring."*

From across the room the prayer group was getting loud with their chants, "JO JO, OREO, SPAGHETTI-O." On one round they inserted the word "mojo." This induced laughter from around the room (a little colonial resistance perhaps?). The teacher rushed over and yelled at them in his pseudo-language. One of the students was punished "to the wolves."

After the groups had circulated through all five centers, they were sent back to the floor in the middle of the room. The teacher took of his hood and said, in English, "What was that all about?" Students raised their hands and gave interpretations. They understood this as a role-play connected to the curriculum they had been studying on European colonization of the Americas. They explained that he was like the Spanish missionaries and they were Native Americans. The teacher explained that he developed this language with another teacher. They did not want to use Spanish

for two reasons. First, many of the students in class speak Spanish and it was important that they did not understand his words to make the activity more authentic. Second, he did not use Spanish because he does not speak the language. He asked the class, "Why do you think I didn't let you talk?" One student offered an idea, "I think it symbolized Native Americans' solitude in the missions." Another student added, "I think they were trying to take away Native Americans' language and culture." The teacher agreed and explained that the Spaniards came and forced the Native Americans to do things they had already been doing, like farming and praying, but to do it in a totally different way. He asked the class, "When was the priest happiest?" The students replied by talking about times they did exactly as he had asked. One student raised her hand, "What would have happened if all of us rebelled?" The teacher replied with, "I don't know, I guess I would have had to send you all to the wolves. I'm glad you didn't think of it."

This story from Mr. Burns' class triangulates my participants' claims that he indeed addressed issues that related to Mexican history. Not only did he address content that the students saw as culturally relevant, in this example he also did it in a dynamic and interactive way. Rather than using a traditional transmission model of lecture, he developed an interactive, hands-on approach to teaching about the colonization of Mexico. It was obvious that the students were engaged, and judging from their reflective comments they made many connections between the ways they felt during the lesson to some of the deeper meanings behind colonization.

I asked why other White teachers at the school do not also notice that there are a high percentage of Mexican students and therefore change their curriculum to be more culturally relevant.

> Sonia: Maybe they don't know, maybe they don't know, maybe we are judging them wrong. But maybe they don't know or maybe they do but they prefer—
> Ines: Not to talk about it.
> Sonia: Yeah.
> Jaqueline: Or maybe they just don't care.

For the other White teachers who "do not understand," the students were not sure whether they do not know about Mexican culture or do not care. It is likely that these White teachers are well intentioned but view curriculum as neutral and strive to keep it free of conflict and controversy (Kohl, 1994). Unfortunately, not all students experience school that way. In fact, the whole idea of keeping curriculum neutral may reinforce racism, because mainstream curriculum is slanted toward a Eurocentric perspective and thus negates the cultures of students of color (Kohl, 1994). The example brought forth by my participants highlighted the possibility that students view teachers who address issues that are culturally relevant as teachers who care, and they believe this is a more effective teaching style. On the other hand, my participants described teachers who stick to traditional mainstream curriculum as potentially not caring about them and their educational experiences, and thus curriculum is subtractive (Valenzuela, 1999). Except for a few rare exceptions, the participants of color in this study are experiencing school curriculum that is mismatched with their cultural background (Nieto, 1999) and thus run the risk of

loosing interest and feeling apathy. This has dire consequences; over time it can result in school failure or dropping out of school altogether (Pitton, 2001).

Beth, the only White participant in the study, had been quiet throughout the session. After the other children left she stayed to help me clean up, and I asked her why she did not say anything in the discussion. She said that she was upset that the children were speaking negatively about their teachers. She was particularly upset that they claimed White teachers do not care about students of color and do not know about their culture. She said she knows a lot of teachers who care about all of their students. She claimed that a lot of her teachers know more about her than her parents do. It made her angry that the students were attacking certain teachers. I commented that for the most part nobody mentioned specific teachers by name. She said that they did not have to say names because it was obvious whom they were talking about. I reminded her that the others spoke very favorably about one White teacher who they believe "understood" their culture. She said that they only said that about Mr. Burns because he is "not exactly White." I know this teacher and was confused, so I asked her about his background. She replied, "I don't know, but he's not all White."

I am not sure how to interpret this last statement by Beth. When I asked her to explain what she meant, I could get nothing else from her. Although I am unsure of her exact meaning, and it appears she is not sure either, it shows how understanding race and ethnicity is very complex and is on the minds of students in school.

Looking for Positive Alternatives

The children are indeed "ripe" for contexts dealing with issues of social justice (McDaniel et al., 2001). Racism is an issue that is at the forefront of their minds and manifested in their daily lives (Nieto, 1999). Identifying racism is important but cannot be the endpoint. Children also must become aware of what can be done about the problem. Tatum (1997) stated, "Learning to recognize cultural and institutional racism and other forms of inequity without also learning strategies to respond to them is a prescription for despair" (p. 49). Tatum advocated speaking up when racism surfaces.

Students may feel they do not have the power to demand that all of their teachers adopt culturally relevant pedagogy over more traditional curricula. To do so would require a very organized effort that they may not be equipped to undertake. Kohl (1994) gave examples of African American students involved with the Black Panther movement in the 1960s who actively resisted and confronted racist teachers. Although I admire it, I was in no position to advocate this style of civil disobedience for my participants. Because my study included students making movies depicting school and we had just discussed racism in mainstream movies, it seemed appropriate to address the problem of racism in media and the possibilities for change. Having identified the problem of societal racism and how it manifests in media, I asked the students what they thought could be done to correct that problem.

In response to my question Joe suggested a protest. He was unsure of exactly how to do it but thought perhaps they could talk to the people who make movies and

ask them why they show Latinos and African Americans the way they do. Tony brought up the notion of freedom of the press and free speech and claimed there was nothing they could do about it. Beth responded to Tony by saying, "You can use your freedom of speech to work against it. Everyone has it. You can't stop someone but you can contradict what they are doing." Joe's vague ideas about a protest and Tony's disempowered views signaled a lack of agency felt by these participants. On one hand, they have identified a problem but do not have the faith in the system or the personal experience to know what they can do to make a difference. Beth, on the other hand, again has the most faith in the democratic ideal. As she did in the discussion about societal racism, she expressed that they too have the power to create representations. Their representations can work to counter racism found in mainstream movies.

Beth's idea would require both a sense of agency and a politicized worldview on the part of the participants. To create alternative depictions of students of color is just the type of thing Weis and Fine (2000) referred to when they advocated for research that interrupts the sensationalized representations of people of color that are typically seen. To produce these counterhegemonic narratives they advocated a close focus on the mundane aspects of life such as going to school, watching the television, and reading the newspaper. The participants in my study were in a perfect position to produce such narratives because, as Bernice would say, they are "just normal kids" who, as Joe said, "are not that hyper." On the whole they are pretty successful in school even though they are quick to tell you that it is "boring."

In hopes of promoting discussion and in sparking an interest in the possibility of depicting their lives on film, I wanted to show my participants an example of what I consider to be a counterhegemonic movie about students of color. I chose to show the group a segment from the video *Ed Couch-Elsa.*

Ed Couch-Elsa is a movie made about students from the Llano Grande Center in Ed Couch-Elsa High School. The movie offers an emic perspective about the lives of four highly successful Latino/a high school students from the Rio Grande Valley in Texas. It is an emic, or insider's, perspective because teachers and students from the center helped make the movie. One theme in the movie is to highlight the richness of the students' community. Rather than focus on the economic poverty and educational deficits, which is usually the case in movies that treat the subject of Latino students from the border area, this movie focuses on the culture of the students and shows how culture can and should be considered an asset. The students at this center have tremendous pride in their cultural background and use it to achieve academic success.

The segment I selected for our discussion was about a girl named Olga. Olga graduated as the valedictorian of the high school. The narrative style of the movie creates a feeling that the audience is hearing Olga's perspective. In scenes from interviews with Olga she tells about her life; in other scenes teachers speak about her; in some scenes the camera follows her in her daily experiences. What makes this video entirely different from other documentaries that purport to be in the "voice" of the main character is that this film was shot and made by people who work at the Llano Grande Center, Olga being one of them. The moviemakers not only know Olga

on a very deep personal level, they are also from the same community. The people involved in making this movie are obviously dedicated to creating counterhegemonic representations of Latino/a youth. Olga's story is a good example of this type of story. Olga is portrayed as an excellent student, an athlete, and a responsible and caring person. Her intense desire to achieve and her strong work ethic are highlighted in the video. The video shows how her path to higher education was disrupted because she did not have citizenship in this country. Even with her many assets colleges were not willing to grant her admissions or scholarships because of her residency status. By the end of the segment, a frustrated Olga who eventually got the paperwork through the bureaucracy of the Immigration and Naturalization Service had missed the deadlines for the Ivy League schools and was resigned to go to a less prestigious state school.

I selected this particular segment of this video for a number of reasons.

1. I believe it represents Latino/a youth in a light that is rarely seen in mainstream media depictions. Olga is intelligent and hard working and is thwarted by a system that is anything but a level playing field. In this way the video shows a critical perspective that is counterhegemonic.

2. The video is made by insiders to the community that it tries to represent and is perhaps a more valid representation of the protagonists' perspective.

3. The main character in the video is a girl. I wanted to provide balance in the films I asked the participants to view, since they were a mixed-gender group.

4. Finally, since the majority of my participants come from immigrant Latino families, I believed the issues faced by Olga might resonate for them on a personal level in some way.

While the movie was playing the participants seemed to be paying close attention. Aside from a few loud yawns and groans from the boys, the participants watched the movie in silence. When the segment ended I asked the participants for their reaction to the film. The children looked at me in silence with glazed expressions on their faces. I was shocked because I was sure they would have a great deal to say about this provocative film.

When nobody offered any commentary I asked the children to contrast this video with the one we saw earlier about a boy named Orlando. In my view the movies are drastically different, most noticeably in their stances. Although the movie about Orlando skipping school is purported to be Orlando's voice, the video was made by professional filmmakers and depicted the Latino teenage protagonist in a sensationalizing way. After viewing this video my participants had commented that it was overly dramatic and not realistic. I imagined that the participants would have much to say about the Olga video because it offered a much more sensitive insider's perspective. Rather than the dynamic discussion I had anticipated, the students focused on concrete details. Joe explained what each movie was about and spoke about the differences of the two characters' academic achievements and attitudes towards school. Thalía explained that Orlando did not take the opportunity to study

hard and do well in school, but Olga did; yet, Olga still could not go where she wanted.

I asked the participants if they saw any differences in terms of the styles of the different movies. Sonia said they were very different. She said the movie about Olga was more dramatic and sad. Bernice tried to explain Sonia's point by saying, "I think she was trying to say it was boring." In disbelief, I asked the others if they agreed that the movie was boring. The next segment of transcript shows their answer to the question.

> DeAndre: It was boring.
> Sonia: It was kind of boring
> Fransisco: It was too long
> (Girls are talking. They seem to agree.)
> DeAndre: There was no action.
> Fransisco: Like boxing
> DeAndre: Girls fighting—now that's action.
> Sonia: The other one had music and all that.
> Me: This one had music, by the way.
> Sonia: It was like sad, classical music.

The consensus seemed to be that the movie about Olga was boring for them. They liked the qualities of the movie about Orlando that had led me to conclude that it sensationalized his experience and created a stereotypical image of Latino youth. Though the children recognized racism in the depictions of youth of color when they are portrayed as "wild" and "violent," they still found these representations entertaining. DeAndre and Fransisco wanted more action, and Sonia seemed to be saying she preferred the hip-hop soundtrack of Orlando's movie to the slower music in the movie about Olga. These were stylistic qualities that had led them to critique

the Orlando movie and *Dangerous Minds* as too dramatic and unrealistic. Perhaps the students are not politicized enough to recognize the importance of doing exactly what Beth had purposed: creating counterhegemonic representations.

The students did have a point: Most mainstream movies tend to focus on exciting or unusual lives. However, my intention was to have them analyze the standard depictions of children of color and to plant a seed for the need for critical representations and representations that fight against stereotypes. I thought depicting "normal" kids and successful kids, who happen to be children of color, would be an important way to combat the racism in the typical media representations. The participants did not see things this way; instead, they wanted action, something to hold the interest of the audience. I did not want to give up on this goal, so I pressed them to consider creating a movie like this about themselves.

> Me: Would you be interested in making a movie like this about yourself? Like a story?
> Jaqueline (and others agree): No
> Me: Why not?
> Jaqueline: Because knowing that one bored, well it bored me, then making one exactly like it—Knowing that from my point of view it bores me so making one like it about me will probably bore other people, so why make one like that?
> Me: OK.
> Sonia: And also thinking about it. Like, I know—I understand what they are trying to say, you know like immigrants, but what if one's not an immigrant, and one's a normal student, why would other people be interested in our lives?
> Me: Hmm.
> Sonia: Like I know my life is not very interesting and nobody would want to make a movie about my life.
> Me: You don't think your life is interesting?

Sonia: Well, it's just like any other. You go to school, you go home, you go with your family you have a nice time, and then you go to church and then you come back to school. It's like (she makes a circle with her hand).
Thalia: It's a pattern.
Bernice: It's the same thing every day.
Me: So you don't feel that is exciting enough.
Sonia: Yeah

The answer to my question hit at the heart of what I wanted for my dissertation, only we seemed to have very different opinions on the matter. The girls do not believe their lives are interesting enough to be worthy of a movie. They think anyone who saw a movie about their lives would be bored. Sonia considers herself "normal," not an immigrant, and does not understand why it would be valuable to show a normal life in movie. I am struck by the amazing similarities between Sonia's analysis of her "boring" life and the types of mundane focuses advocated by Weis and Fine (2000), where they call for the excavation of just such types of experiences. Sonia made a circle with her hand and described her routine, "You go to school, you go home, you go with your family you have a nice time, and then you go to church and then you come back to school." Her list could have been lifted practically verbatim from the list written by Weis and Fine.

In addition to the value of making counterhegemonic representations of children of color to combat stereotypes, I believe there is value in mining the many assets the children have outside of school (Moll et al., 1992). Making space in the school to valorize the culture and interests of all children is an important component of culturally relevant pedagogy and something that is absent in traditional schooling (Kohl, 1994). I thought if I reminded them of their critique of White teachers' not

understanding the cultures and interests of the Latino students, perhaps they would see the value in depicting their lives on film. I suggested that this could be a means to communicate with teachers so they would learn more about their students' lives. Here is what Sonia had to say:

> Sonia: But what about, for example if we are going to do a movie about me, then if my life doesn't really show the Mexican culture, it's just like probably just showing the American culture, then it's not really explaining other cultures. So if we are doing a project about showing the teachers' culture that they don't know—but what about if our culture is the same thing as them? There wouldn't be no point in actually making a movie about it.
> Me: OK so you feel like you have the same culture as your White teachers in your school that—
> Sonia: Well, not exactly but not very different.

What the participants did not seem to see is that the depiction of Olga is very carefully constructed to counter mainstream stereotypes of children of color. Rather than being "wild" or "violent," characteristics Joe and others identified as typical in mainstream media, Olga is intelligent and hardworking. Her troubles arise because of an oppressive system that makes her goals of college almost unattainable. Rather than blaming the victim for difficulties encountered in her life, the movie highlights the struggles of one individual in an oppressive system where there is anything but a level playing field. Maybe all of these points are very obvious to the students, but they do not see the point of putting them in a movie. Putting themselves on screen for others to view would make them vulnerable, and perhaps that is not worth it considering the limited reward or impact a movie might have to change a problem like societal racism.

Perhaps the participants were bored from this movie because they have been fed a steady diet of sensationalized, action-packed, representations of children of color in the media. This is what they expect to see when they sit down to watch a movie. This is what defines entertainment. They do not want to see a "boring life" like their own mundane lives depicted on the screen. Not confined to, but certainly a characteristic of being a teenager is a desire to be entertained (Perry, 2002). Unfortunately, a depiction of a boring life is not as entertaining as what Weis and Fine (2000) referred to as "hot stories." From a critical researcher's standpoint it is unfortunate that the participants do not want to make mundane movies, because what is lost is the chance for children of color to create positive images of people from oppressed groups and thus challenge the negative messages so pervasive in our society (Tatum, 1997).

For example, Sonia was the most vocal in her unwillingness to make a movie about her life. She said this is because "my life doesn't really show Mexican culture" and she is just a "normal student." What exactly does normal mean? In the context of dominant culture in the United States "normal" refers to White and middle class (McLaren, 1994). This is a characteristic shared by most of Sonia's teachers. I can only speculate about what it is about her life that she considers "normal." But consider some aspects of Sonia that could be considered extraordinary.

Sonia and her family are Zapoteco Indians from Oaxaca, Mexico. In Mexico being Indian is often characterized by poverty and stigmatized by being equated with ignorance (Paz, 1950). At home her parents speak Zapateco, their first language.

Although they are from a mountain village in Mexico, Sonia's parents did not learn to speak Spanish until they were teenagers. Sonia understands Zapateco and speaks Spanish and English fluently. The fact that she is trilingual may seem like a huge asset, as it should; however, being a nonnative English speaker and a product of bilingual education puts Sonia in a category that is considered "at risk" by the school district she attends. Her parents are immigrants and would be considered members of the working poor. This, according to most measures of educational success, would be another strike against Sonia.

However, Sonia does not fit the negative stereotype of a Latina bilingual underachiever. She has been an overachiever since early elementary school. In the fifth grade Sonia won a citywide essay contest entitled "Mayor for the Day." As her reward she attended a city council meeting and acted as the mayor of the city. My teaching partners and I watched as this barely 4-foot tall child conducted the council proceedings with confidence, much to the amazement of the elected officials. She is now an academically successful student in the middle school magnet program.

A movie needs to be made about Sonia because she has become everything she is in spite of a system that is stacked against children like her. Yet, she does not see this, or she does not want to draw attention to this aspect of her life. She wants to portray herself as normal. Why shouldn't she? She is a normal child, she enjoys popular music for teenagers, she is interested in stylish clothing, she enjoys socializing with her friends, she is active in the youth organization of her church, and she loves to socialize with her friends.

When Sonia said her life would not show Mexican culture, that did not mean that she does not identify as Mexican or Mexican American. She is at a stage in her life where she is beginning to define herself. She wants to establish her autonomy. She also sees that she has many influences that make her who she is; a great deal of those influences come from the United States, and in her mind this makes her not "typically Mexican." Therefore, when thinking about making a movie to "teach" her teachers about Mexican culture, she quite reasonably felt that her life might not be the best example. However, I think that she would agree that there is no typical Mexican child, so showing this to some of her teachers might make the movie idea a worthwhile endeavor.

Sonia is one example from the 11 participants in my study. Each of them has a unique story just as compelling and just as "normal" as hers. Race and ethnicity play a huge role in the way Sonia and the other participants in my study experience school and the broader society outside of school. Teachers must do more than incorporate students' cultures into their classrooms. They must strive to find ways to valorize students' backgrounds and their knowledge in authentic ways while attempting to deconstruct hegemonic views that prop up the dominant, racist culture.

Contradictions in Students' Voices—When Hegemony Creeps in

As has been documented with the above examples, the participants in my study were quite aware of and articulate about the prevalence of racism in our society. At times in the course of my investigation I felt that dominant views about race and

schooling crept into the conversations of my participants. One such example happened in a discussion about a short video made by DeAndre, Tony, and Fransisco. The video was the product of an activity called Scavenger Hunt in which the students were asked to use video to answer the question, What is school really like?

The boys' video was 2 minutes long and presented a view of school in a collage of scenes with a hip-hop audio track. The scenes did not reference academics but extracurricular activities like cheerleading and basketball and a brief visit to the orchestra room. There was also a short clip of some children playing around in a hallway.

The participants were glued to the television while the boys' video was playing. From their facial expressions it was apparent that they were engrossed. The children were smiling and nodding their heads while watching. At times the children watching would shout out comments to each other about the scenes as they appeared on the screen.

When the video ended I asked the children to comment on the film. There was consensus that the film was a good representation of school. Bernice commented, "That video was realistic." Bernice, in a previous session, had been critical of documentary as a genre because she felt that it distorts reality. Furthermore, she commented that the video was interesting because it held the audience's attention. She said, "I liked it because it kept your attention. It kept my attention at least because I was really into it." So DeAndre, Tony, and Fransisco were able to capture

in their short video the action required to appease the participants' desire for a movie that is not "boring."

Sonia initiated an interesting discussion that built on Bernice's claims that the movie was realistic and represented Live Oak well. She explained that she felt the music the boys selected for the soundtrack represented the school well. The music they chose is by the Yin Yang Twins and was a popular hip-hop song at the time the movie was made. She equated the style of music with the atmosphere of the school.

> S: I was going to say that I liked the music at the beginning because the type of music they chose is good for our school because, come on, we are on the South Side and like our school is not that nice and kind of like ghetto-ish and all that, so the music goes with our school.

By equating Live Oak with the music and saying they are "ghetto-ish" Sonia racialized the conversation. Although this style of music is connected to a huge marketing industry whose grasp reaches well beyond the inner city, it still carries the image of representing the urban poor experience. More specifically, hip-hop music is a style of music that is largely made by African American men and women and often treats issues related to urban life. Sonia seemed to believe that Live Oak is an urban school that could perhaps be considered a ghetto school that, as she pointed out, is "not that nice." In a sense she was sensationalizing the story of her own school. It is not that I do not believe what Sonia was saying. The participants commented about children who disrupt class and children who are involved in gangs. However, they also discussed in detail how these types of images not only do not represent them but also fuel negative stereotypes of children of color.

Because the style of music is currently in vogue it carries with it an image of what I would call "cool"; my participants would probably say "tight." In fact, the coolness factor associated with hip-hop music transcends the music itself and influences the way teenagers dress and talk. Although the music originated as an African American art form, it seems to have reached across racial and class categories. Therefore Sonia's comment about Live Oak is not merely a racial categorization but probably carries with it a certain status.

Perry (2002) explained that popular culture is an important aspect in teenagers' identity formation. The type of music children listen to is very important component in this.

> Such things as music, clothing, hair styles, body piercing, sports, and street language are the principal tools by which young people can claim personal power and mark a multiplicity of identities, including peer group, gender, class, and racial identities. (p. 104)

Ines added to Sonia's comment and further explained how music marks young people's class and racial identities. She offered a hypothetical example of the type of music that would represent a school on the other side of town.

> Ines: Like in Bestview since it's like a private school, they would probably have orchestra music or something like that.
> Tony: Yeah, probably like Minuet 1.
> Me: Well, OK because why?
> Ines: They are, they are not as wild as public school, you know like—
> Tony: As Mexicans?
> Ines: (yells, laughing) Hey. Don't be racist now.
> (girls laugh)
> Jaqueline: How can it be racist?
> Tony: No, I mean like they are more like—
> Joe: They are preppie.

Me: Are you saying like they are preppie? It's almost entirely a White school right?
Ines and Bernice: Yeah.

Ines was mistaken; Bestview is not a private school but an affluent public school district in the suburbs of this city. The school district is predominantly White, and Ines's comment showed how race and class intersect. She believes orchestra music would suitably represent their affluence and Whiteness. Tony agreed with this point by proposing Minuet 1, an introductory piece learned by most beginning strings players.

When I asked why they picked orchestra music for this particular group Ines responded that they are "not as wild as public school." When she said public school she was referring to the kids at her school. She was making a distinction based on race and class, and her analysis seemed to reflect hegemony. Tony read between the lines of what she was saying and challenged her by asking if she meant Mexicans are wild. This is interesting because it is the exact same wording the children used when they were critiquing mainstream media for being racist. Ines was one of the most vocal participants who objected to the racism in media. Now it seemed that she had internalized the message to some degree and was referring to the children in her own school with the same adjectives.

The participants seemed to have mixed or even contradictory feelings about how they want to be represented. On one hand, they are aware of the negative stereotypes of students of color and do not consider themselves to be like that. They have personal experience with inequality and are eager to find solutions to social

problems like racism. On the other hand, like so many teenagers today they identify with the "coolness" of the image of being urban youth. Like most teenagers they are interested in action and entertainment over a "boring" but politicized representation. Where I see hegemony, the participants in my study likely see entertainment.

Groups in our School

The first group to decide on a topic for their movie project was Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline. As the other participants struggled to come up with ideas, these 3 girls went with the school topic closest to their hearts: the social scene at Live Oak. In Session 4 Jaqueline explained to me that they decided they wanted to do a movie about the "different groups at school." The 3 had already discussed it and decided they would like to film during lunch when students group themselves according to friendships. When they explained this to me, I wrote in my fieldnotes that this seemed perfect because these 3 girls seemed to "live and breathe the social scene."

The movie was shot during lunch period in the cafeteria. This, according to the filmmakers, is one of the few times that the students are allowed to get together with their friends. Although the girls' stated intent was to document the social groups based on friendships, the movie depicts a social scene that is quite segregated. Thus race and ethnicity became topics that had to be addressed in some fashion. The movie does this visually by showing groups of children sitting together and interacting. In addition, the filmmakers made captions to label each of the groups.

Although the girls might not have been trying consciously to make a statement about race and ethnicity, the way children in the movie were grouped and the way the girls identified them draw attention to the dynamic at the school. The filmmakers as well as the other participants were eager and and yet reluctant to address race and ethnicity in the friendship groups at Live Oak. This was evident when we watched and discussed the video.

Discussing the Movie

When watching the movie the most glaring example of the filmmakers' reluctance to address the issue of race is in the segment entitled "The Cool People." Quickly viewers recognize that this group is comprised of entirely African American children. This is particularly noticeable because there is only one African American student represented in any of the other groups identified in the film, a group called "The Mixed Group." It is not clear in the video why the filmmakers chose to call this group "The Cool People." This did not go unnoticed by the other participants when they viewed and discussed the film.

Bernice objected to title of "Cool People" because she did not understand why they were bestowed with the honor of being cool. She questioned why the filmmakers would avoid using a title like "The Black People," since another group obviously segregated by race had the title "The White People."

Me: Do you feel they got the groups in a realistic way?
Bernice: Yeah, I guess. But—yeah—except they showed the groups but they should have titled it a different name. "The Cool People" (she shakes her head no).
Me: Why do you object to that?
Bernice: Because I mean they should have called them—like they called "The White People," they should have called "The Black People." 'Cause they're not really cool. Well, for me they're not really cool. And I don't think for them either. I think cool for them is—I don't know—somebody else. I think they just should have changed the title from "The Cool People" to just "The Black People."

When Beth viewed and discussed the film she had a similar reaction to the identification of this group as "The Cool People." Beth questioned why the filmmakers chose this particular name and even questioned if the group was really only one group.

Me: If I had assigned you the same topic would you have chosen the same names for the groups?
Beth: "The Cool Group," I don't know whose perspective they thought those were the cool people from. 'Cause I don't think that there really is a cool group in Live Oak. I don't think that was really a group. I think that was not even a group. I guess it was like the Black community.
Me: That's interesting, because a lot of the people that watched the movie asked why it was called "The Cool Group," and they thought it should be called "The Black Group." So why do you say the Black community?
Beth: (she quiets her voice to almost a whisper) Because a lot of those people, I guess they are not even like friends. But if you look at it, it's all Black people. So it's not even really a group. It was more of a community.
Me: They were all at the same table, but you are saying there are many groups within that at the same table?
Beth: Yeah.

Beth had the same critique as Bernice when she objected to titling this group "cool." She explained that cool is a very subjective word, and there is not some kind of consensus at the school that these children are the coolest people. However, Beth also took the question further when she questioned if all of the children represented as

a group are even friends. She claimed that they have been lumped together but are not even one group. In her opinion it would be more suitable to call this clip "The Black Community" because many subgroups are represented. Her astute observation is remarkably congruent with Tatum's (1997) analysis in her book, "*Why Are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?"* What Tatum posited, and Beth may not be conscious of, is that African American students often sit together for reasons of support and racial identity formation. Although Beth noticed that this group is not a monolithic "cool" group, she appeared to be as uncomfortable as the filmmakers when speaking about it, evident by her change to a whisper. It was as if by addressing the topic of race, she was afraid of being seen as racist (Nieto, 2000).

When DeAndre and Tony saw the video they, too, objected to the label of "The Cool People." They drew attention to the fact that the three predominant racial/ethnic groups at Live Oak are Latino, African American, and White. Further, since the movie explicitly labeled one group as "Mexicans" and another as "Whites," then it would make sense to Tony that the "Cool Group" really should have been called "The Black Group."

> DeAndre: They should edit out—they put the Mexicans in there and all that, if you are going to put that in there then you should put everything.
> Tony: Well I'll put something on to D's [statement] because they are doing it all groups of White people by themselves. Not all together. Like they should have done—like "cool people" that should have been the Blacks. If they are going to do the Mexicans and Whites they should have done all three.

Similar to the way Beth seemed uncomfortable with highlighting the segregated nature of many of the social groups, the boys were uncomfortable with the

racialized identification of groups. This was clear when they commented that they felt it was offensive that the girls identified groups based on race and ethnicity.

> DeAndre: They shouldn't have put anything that has a racial remark in it. Like Mexicans, Blacks, all that stuff like that.
> Me: Is that racist to identify kids as Mexicans?
> DeAndre: Yeah, it could be racist.
> Tony: They could have said the group of White—oh no, that's still racist.
> DeAndre: Or they could have said the group of good Mexicans or something, or citizens or something like that—
> Tony: The group that is filled with mostly White people.
> Joe: They should have done it with different kind of names. Not like White people. That's messed up.
> Tony: Yeah, that was really messed up.
> DeAndre: If they just arrange it a little bit better where they could make it so it didn't offend nobody, then it would be a great movie and stuff. But you know it's just offending—I'm not saying that it is—but if you could make it where it's not offending anybody at all and make it funny and interesting, then yeah. Other than that I liked it.

What the boys were saying was that in their opinion using racial or ethnic signifiers to identify people is racist and offensive. They were explicit about this, as was apparent when Tony tried to offer an alternative name for the "White People," said, "They could have said the group of White," and then interrupted himself and reflected, "Oh no, that's still racist." The statements of the boys indicated that they have internalized a common societal belief that it is polite to be "color blind," and to draw attention to race and or ethnicity would be improper (Nieto, 2000).

When the filmmakers were called upon to answer the critique of their choice of the name "The Cool People," they had a hard time. It became obvious that they did not necessarily consider the African American students to be the cool group as much as that they were reluctant to single out the African American students by race.

Me: Why did you pick the name "The Cool People"?
Ines: Because most people are scared of them.
Me: Why?
Ines: Like a lot of White people are scared of them because if you say something bad about them they come, and they mostly like, they just say—
Bernice: The way they are. That's why they put the name I guess.
Me: What do you mean the way *they* are? That doesn't explain anything.
Bernice: The way they are. The way they see things, the way they think they are.
Ines: The way we see them.
Me: So you see them as cool?
Ines: No
Bernice: So why did you put the cool people?
Ines: I have no idea. I didn't want to say "I hate them" because I don't like them.
Jaqueline: We just put names.
Bernice: Yeah, but you all should have put the Black people.
Ines: We actually messed that up.

I am not certain why these girls were so hesitant to label the African American children when they clearly did not have a problem doing so with the Mexican group or the White group. However, I do have some theories. The 3 girls themselves are Latina, and while they do not consider themselves a part of the group they called "Mexican," they identify ethnically, at least somewhat, with this group. Therefore, they did not feel the risk of sounding racist by identifying this group by ethnicity. The White group is representative of the dominant culture in our society, therefore identifying them in a racialized way probably did not seem derogatory; being White in our society carries with it a great deal of privilege and entitlement. When it came time to label the group of African American children in the cafeteria the girls seemed to have some mixed feelings. They were reluctant to call them Black perhaps for reasons that I have suggested: In a racist society like ours to be Black is often

considered to have a deficit by the dominant culture. It is impossible to live in the United States and not be aware of this. The girls seemed to have "othered" the African American students in a way that is not so unusual in our society. Ines suggested that the African American children are somehow threatening and dangerous and that many students, especially the White students, are afraid of them. Ines said she hates them but did not want to label them in that way. It seemed that the name "cool" was given in order to avoid sounding racist. It is not so surprising that the girls selected a word like "cool" when searching for a nonderogatory term for African American students, since popular culture is one of the few areas in society where dominant culture seems to be more accepting of African American culture. It is chic for adolescents from just about every conceivable background to emulate what they see in hip-hop culture. I am not suggesting that the girls consciously chose their words, the way an adult sensitive to the political nature of language might; however, it seems likely that on some level they are keenly aware of the racist hierarchy of the society in which we live and this informed their choice of wording.

"The Cool People" was not the only name that drew attention to the racialized groupings of students at Live Oak. The moviemakers' choice of the label "The White People" was mostly received with chuckles. Apart from the boys who expressed offense at all of the racial and ethnic labels, the others felt that this was an appropriate name for this group. Beth, who considers herself a member of this group, explained that she felt this was a name that they would call themselves.

Me: And we don't know that the people in the movie would call themselves by the names they were labeled in the movie.
Beth: Oh, the White people would. Because that's what they are—That's what we are.

Beth was giggling and turning red when she explained that her group was indeed the White group. Although it might have been embarrassing for her to divulge this information, somehow it did not seem as potentially offensive to bring attention to the racial composition of her group as it did when she whispered about the "Black community." Perhaps for Beth to identify someone as a member of the dominant group is not problematic; however, to identify someone as Black or African American is to draw attention to a weakness or a problem and therefore could be construed as rude.

Bernice and Thalía felt that the label "The Mexicans" was not an adequate representation of that group. They pointed out that the movie only showed boys, and many girls at Live Oak are also Mexican.

Me: Would you have made these same groups?
Bernice: Yeah, I would. 'Cause Mexican, those are the ones that are there. But that was kind of just boys.
Thalía: Yeah, they should also just tape the girls. 'Cause there is more people in the group of Mexicans.
Bernice: Yeah, and they are all mixed. Like girls and boys in the Mexican group.

Bernice and Thalía wanted to see a more comprehensive representation of the students who comprise each group. In their example they pointed out that the movie only showed boys in the group called "The Mexicans." This gives the false impression that there are no girls in this group.

Like Bernice and Thalía, the boys observed how the filmmakers chose to represent the group in the segment entitled "The Mexicans." Bernice and Thalía objected to what was left out of the depiction, but the boys objected to something that was left in. Since all of my participants were together in a room when they were working in small groups to edit their movies, they were familiar with the footage the other students had taken and were present during the editing phase of each other's movies. The boys pointed out that the way in which Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline edited their movie framed "The Mexicans" in a derogatory light.

> Joe: You know they edited out a lot of parts like the Orchestra people, they edited that out. And they caught Ines sticking her finger out at the camera—
> Me: And that was in there?
> Joe: That was supposed to be in there.
> Me: Of course every time you make a movie you have to edit stuff out and Ines was making the movie, she probably didn't want that part in the movie.
> Tony: But they didn't edit it out of the Mexican part (referring to the boys giving the finger to the camera).
> Joe: I know. That's what I'm talking about, because I'm Mexican, too. She didn't put me in there.
> Tony: It's not like we flip tortillas all night long.

What Joe was referring to in his first statement about Orchestra people is that the original footage taken by the girls included a scene in the Orchestra room where Ines looks straight into the camera and gives the finger. This he claimed, "is supposed to be in there," meaning the girls should have included it in the final version of their movie. I did not understand the significance of what he was saying, so I rebutted that she certainly had the right to edit it out since she was the filmmaker and probably did not want all of us to see her doing that. What Tony pointed out that was important is

that she and her moviemaking partners did not choose to edit out the part where the Mexican boys gave the finger to the camera. Joe explained that he is Mexican, too, even though he was not cast in this way in the movie, and he finds this representation offensive. Joe and Tony's observations are important because, although giving the finger to the camera was playful and many of the groups actually did this when they were being filmed, the only example of it that was left in the final version of the movie was of the group called "The Mexicans." This creates a negative stereotypical depiction of Mexican boys and is reminiscent of the stereotypical depictions of youth of color that my participants, of which Ines was one of the most vocal and articulate, objected to in mainstream media. Thus Tony concluded with the comment about "flip[ping] tortillas all night long."

Unfortunately I do not have a good explanation for why the girls who made the film depicted the "Mexicans" this way but were careful to edit out all of the many, diverse other examples of children giving the finger to the camera. The incident draws attention to another interesting aspect of the complex nature of social groupings. Although Joe did appear in the movie and was considered a part of a group called "The Others," he also self-identified as "Mexican." Tony was not in any of the scenes in the movie; he called his own group "The Left-Out People" and "The Yu-Gi-Oh People." However, he also identified as Mexican when he was objecting to the way the Mexican group was depicted.

I found that many of my participants would identify simultaneously with ethnic and/or racial groups and then reject being categorized as part of a group. This

dynamic highlights the complexity of adolescents' identity formation. On some level my participants seemed aware of the social construction of race and ethnicity. They recognized that they are seen by others as members of particular groups and felt pride and affiliation with these groups, however they also demanded to be seen as unique individuals.

Unique Individuals

I think she's [saying] everybody has a different background. – Thalía, Session 5

Although the participants recognized that race and ethnicity seem to play a role in how children at Live Oak form friendships and that many of the social groups can be defined by this, a tension existed because they also see themselves as unique individuals. Thalía's statement summed up this perspective. While they may share many commonalities (such as a similar culture, language, and nationalities), "everybody has a different background" because no two people are exactly the same. This was a very important point for my participants, who talked about group identity but then quickly focused on unique traits of individuals.

Tatum (1997) explained that Whites often express frustration or even anger at being seen as a member of a group rather than as an individual. Similarly, Nieto (2000) shared a case study of a White adolescent girl named Vanessa who has never had to identify ethnically or racially because she has always been considered "normal." Discussing the issue of self-identification with the interviewer made Vanessa "embarrassed and uncomfortable" (p. 74). Nieto explained that discussing

cultural differences seemed to offend her; "It was almost as if it were rude to broach questions of race and culture, that discussing them meant you were a racist" (p. 79). This attitude, according to Nieto, is common, because in dominant culture differences are commonly seen as deficiencies. The assumption is "to be color-blind is to be fair, impartial, and objective because to see differences . . . is to see deficits and inferiority" (p. 138).

Similar to Nieto's "Vanessa," Beth seemed to share the discomfort of discussing culture and group identification. As noted in the preceding chapter Beth was reluctant to talk about White privilege and societal racism in relation to the issue of freedom. When discussing the perspective of the moviemakers of *A Day at School* she commented, "I hate saying 'groups.'" When talking about the movie *Groups in our School*, Beth showed a similar reluctance to talk about group identity. Although Beth self-identified as a member of the White group, almost immediately she rejected the classification as a group. When I asked her to explain why she thought there was a White group, she felt uncomfortable talking about it.

> Me: And why is it [The White People] a group?
> Beth: I don't know, I guess because we feel like we have to stick together. Or that's who you relate with more. I don't know. I don't even think we are like a group. I just think we are individuals who are always together, so I guess you could call us a group. So, I don't know.

At first Beth stated that they felt that they had to stick together and perhaps that they did so because they can relate to each other. However, that must have sounded bad to her, because she retreated from this stance and claimed that they were not a group but were "individuals who are always together." She recognized that her circle of friends

is comprised of all White people but did not want to accept that it might be related to issues of culture or race.

> Me: But why are you always together?
> Beth: I don't know. We just like all know each other, and even if you have people on totally different sides of an issue, you can like agree to disagree, and even if you have different views you know you can work together. And they are all like really interested in politics like I am. And I don't know. So we just all understand each other.

It is not just self-identification that makes Beth uncomfortable; when she discussed the entire premise of the movie *Groups in our School* she commented that she felt it was good how the filmmakers showed how society labels people, but that the labeling of people into groups is something that she does not like. Instead, she believes in seeing people as individuals. She explicitly stated this opinion when asked how the movie would be different if she had made it.

> Me: But from your point of view. How would it be different?
> Beth: It would just be different. But I did like—I guess this is more about the making of their movie than the content. They got most of their points across without dialogue. They just showed what they thought the groups were then they had the label. And then that shows how we label society.
> Me: That shows how people are labeled in different ways.
> Beth: Right. And with the twins who are staying with us. It's like you are no longer labeled as an individual you are labeled as a group. Because like having the twins at my house, it's like it's not Sean and Shelby; it's The Twins. And it's not Beth, and Caleb, and Rachel, and Kayla; it's White People. And it's not Quinici, and Tamika, and Donovan, and Davion, and Demetrious; it's The Black People—or The Cool People—I don't know where they got that from. So nobody is an individual any more.
> Me: What do you think about that?
> Beth: I don't like labeling people as groups. I just see more people as individuals than groups, I guess.

She considers the identification of group identity the loss of individuality. She compared the ethnic and racial categorizations in the film to the twins who are staying

with her family. She said the two children are never seen as individuals but as "The Twins." In her opinion this is a negative consequence of societal labeling. Her final comment about not labeling people but rather seeing them as individuals is similar to an insistence on color-blindness (Nieto, 2000). Rather than seeing race and ethnicity as additive of richness and diversity, Beth sees it as a defect, because in her view it robs people of their individuality.

Beth's position seems to fit with Tatum's (1997) assertion that White privilege leads many White people to embrace notions of individuality over group memberships based on culture or race. In contrast to the way Whites view individuality and often do not acknowledge their culture, Tatum argued, "People of color learn early in life that they are seen by others as members of a group" (p. 102). The other participants in my study, all children of color, clearly rejected notions of color-blindness. However, this does not mean that they reject individuality.

In this chapter I have recounted discussions by my participants about racism in mainstream media. The children of color in my study were quite articulate when pointing out instances of societal racism that lead to an overrepresentation of White culture on television and in the movies. In addition, they were critical of White teachers who do not seem to understand the cultures of children of color and were insistent that teachers who practice culturally relevant teaching are more effective. These examples demonstrate that my participants of color are acutely aware of race and ethnicity and the fact that they are "seen by others as members of a group."

Although the participants of color in my study see themselves with group identities, a tension exists because they also want to be seen as unique individuals. When discussing the movie *Groups in our School* I asked Bernice and Thalía how they would identify their group. Rather than focus on race or ethnicity, the girls talked about what makes them different.

> Me: Well, what is your group?
> Bernice: We weren't there in the movie.
> Me: But what would it be?
> Bernice: The stupid people—no, just kidding—the funny people. Like today I was choking . . . (they laugh)
> Thalía: Like, remember yesterday with the balloon?
> Bernice: Yeah, It was her birthday yesterday and I gave her a balloon and a present and we were at lunch and I was looking at the balloon and let go of the string and it went up to the ceiling. It was so funny. And it's still there. And we are always laughing, so I think we should be called the funny group.

Bernice and Thalía were electing to identify themselves by aspects of their interactions that distinguish them as young people who have a good time together. They are "funny" and they "are always laughing." They do not choose to identify themselves by racial or ethnic signifiers. However, this is not to say that they do not see these things. Both Bernice and Thalía are aware that they are seen by others as Mexican, and they themselves identify with and are proud to be Mexican. When I asked them if they considered themselves a part of the Mexican group, they explained why this was a complicated question for them to answer.

> Me: Let me ask you a question that is confusing to me. In the movie they have "The Mexican Group," but you guys don't consider yourselves a part of that group. Why is that?
> Bernice: That's 'cause it was all boys.

Me: But you said there were girls in that group. Do you consider yourself a part of that group?
Bernice: Our group or us?
Me: You said there is a group called the Mexican group.
Bernice: I know, but are you saying does our group consider?
Me: How about you personally?
Bernice: Well I am but it's not like I hang out with—oh well, I guess I do hang out with Mexicans.
Thalía: Yeah.
Me: Because—do you consider yourselves Mexicans?
Thalía: Yes.
Bernice: Yeah. One hundred percent.
Me: But then the group that is in this film that is called "The Mexican Group," you don't consider yourselves a part of that group?
Thalía: We talk to them but—
Bernice: We don't hang out with them.
Me: OK.
Bernice: If they [the filmmakers] would have catched us when they were recording groups, they would have called us the Mexicans I guess.
Me: If when they were filming, if they caught your group hanging out at a table, they might have called your group that?
Thalía: Yeah.

The fact that Bernice and Thalía do not see their group as "The Mexican Group" does not detract from the fact that they consider themselves, as Bernice put it, "100%" Mexican. They want to be seen both as Mexican and also as individuals. However, the girls agreed that should they have been filmed for the movie they most likely would have been called "the Mexicans."

It is not that Bernice and Thalía are unaware of their cultural group affiliation or that they do not want to acknowledge it. Instead, they seem to highlight the complex and socially constructed nature of identity. At a time in their lives when they are exploring issues of identity both as individuals and members of a group, they realize that this is a complex question with no easy answer. I am reminded of a

conversation we had during Session 8 while discussing race and ethnicity in the media. In reference to our conversation about depictions of people from different races and ethnicities in the media, I asked the group how they would self-identify. Bernice had a difficult time answering the question.

> Me: How do you identify yourself?
> Bernice: What if you don't know how to identify yourself?
> DeAndre: It is like, how do you represent yourself in the world?
> Thalía: I think she is trying to say that she doesn't know how to identify herself because right now she has many different kinds of attitudes. Kind of like—
> Bernice: It's not always going to be the same thing. And there's nothing like me.
> Me: You are unique?
> Bernice: I am unique
> DeAndre: You could just say, "I have multiple personalities."

DeAndre seems to have hit the nail on the head when he humorously suggests "multiple personalities." Bernice is reluctant to be boxed in by just one categorization. She identifies as Mexican, and she self-identifies as a member of "the funny group." She is both of those things as well as a unique individual. She recognizes that being "Mexican" or "Latino" is an experience that she shares with many other people; however, it is not a monolithic group or a sufficient label for her as a person. She is a young person in a society where being an individual is stressed, so she identifies this way too.

Her reluctance to accept just one group affiliation does not mean that she stresses being an individual at the expense of racial or ethnic group identity. What Bernice describes for herself seems much different from the construct of individuality described by Tatum (1997) and Nieto (2000). When Beth critiqued the societal labels

based on race or ethnicity she explained that group labels negate individuality. What Bernice is talking about is different. She considers herself to be Mexican, "100%," and she is proud of this. She realizes that she would have been cast as a member of "The Mexicans" had the filmmakers directed the gaze of their cameras at her and her friends. However, she also strongly asserts her individuality. She said, "I am unique. There is nobody like me." She does not see group affiliation as a conflict with being considered a unique individual. In this way she seems comfortable with the plurality of identity in the postmodern condition (Roman, 1993). She does not want to be boxed in to something she knows to be too simplistic.

Conclusion: White Teachers and Students of Color—Discussing Race and Ethnicity

Although they may not want to be seen only as members of a racial or ethnic group, my participants were eager to discuss issues of race and ethnicity. Early adolescents are not too young or immature to deal with serious social problems. They have daily experiences with racism; it is an issue that is on their minds, and they are interested in finding equitable solutions to the problem. The students of color in my study were particularly articulate about discussing their frustrations with societal racism. As the primary investigator of this research project I wanted to steer the participants towards constructing what I considered to be counterhegemonic narratives about students of color. I could see that my participants were in a wonderful position to create such narratives. However, the participants did not necessarily share my interest in the mundane. Although they expressed feeling

"normal" and even described their lives as "boring," they seemed attracted to sensational stories that have action. This could have the appearance of an acceptance of, or an internalization of, hegemony. However, this is only a partial picture. Popular culture, which reflects popular views about race, class, and gender, is a vital prop in their search for identity. Like most children their age, the participants in my study want entertainment and excitement.

Educators who successfully teach children from oppressed communities actively affirm the cultures of the children (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Even though most teachers have the best intentions, this is difficult to achieve, especially in communities to which the teachers do not belong. Teachers are used to knowing more than their students, and can find it threatening to think students might know more than they do (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999).

I would like to relate a story of a teacher–student interaction that I observed one day while waiting for a session. It was the planning period for the eighth-grade team, and two White teachers sat in a room going over lesson plans. Three students who were serving as teacher's helpers were also in the room; two of the boys were White and the third was African American. They had finished the tasks asked of them and were waiting for the bell. The two White boys left the room momentarily. Anthony, the African American child, was reciting to himself the lyrics of a song he liked. One of the teachers looked up and commented to Anthony about rap music having excessive vulgar language. Anthony had not used vulgar language, but the teacher felt compelled to give this opinion. Anthony responded to the teacher saying,

"I don't listen to rap. I listen to hip-hop." The teacher with a scholarly tone replied, "That's a little better, at least the rhythms are more sophisticated." Anthony rolled his eyes but he did not respond. Instead he got up and walked out of the room. The teacher became upset with Anthony for leaving the room without permission.

As I stated earlier, popular culture plays a significant role in adolescent identity formation. In addition, children of color often find a mismatch between their cultures and that of the school, which often leads to alienation. The example of Anthony illustrates how teachers inadvertently may play a role in this process. The teacher was not trying to be racist; however, he could not step out of his role of "expert." Even in an area he obviously knew nothing about, he felt compelled to know more than his student. It would not have taken a great degree of humility for this teacher to admit he did not know much about rap music or hip-hop, or even to say that he preferred one style over the other. Instead he talked about "sophisticated rhythms."

The fact that an obviously frustrated Anthony got up and left the room rather than continue with the pointless encounter is evidence of the student's alienation. It is reminiscent of Delpit's (1995) "silenced dialogue." For Anthony there was no point to engage with this White teacher who would not listen. Anthony probably knew he would be reprimanded for leaving the room without permission. Perhaps it was an act of defiance, or maybe he just needed to separate himself before he exploded.

Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) advocated a critical multiculturalism characterized by a partnership model. In this model power is shared thus challenging

the professional mystique "that concentrates power in the hands of experts" (p. 114). Rather than being a monolithic relationship in which the teacher has all the power, this model advocates collaborative relationships in which teachers and students coconstruct curriculum and instruction. This affirms students' voices and allows them to help shape the content, processes, style, and language of the classroom.

White teachers working with students of color must be particularly sensitive to the tendencies for teacher domination. This is true because the hegemony of White racism is ingrained in the very fabric of our being (Scheurich, 2002). The notion of dismantling the "cult of the expert" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998) in favor of a dialogic approach seems like a step in the right direction for resisting hegemony. I believe White teachers need not only to reject expert status but also constantly to question the role of teacher as leader.

Rather than lead, the teacher could become a follower. Sometimes this would involve self-imposed censorship in order to allow traditionally marginalized students opportunities to develop their voices and self-determination. As students lead and teachers follow, teachers gain knowledge of their students' cultures, interests, and desires. Politically the project may not result in revolutionary-sounding ideology, but the process would be about students of color developing agency within a school context and forming trusting relationships with White adults and peers who are not trying to dominate them. What could be more counterhegemonic than that?

Something that I learned from listening to my participants talk about race, ethnicity, and racism is that teenagers need experiences discussing these issues. They

are at a time in their lives when they are exploring the issues of identity, in which race and ethnicity are inherently woven. In addition, they are concerned with equity and desire a more just world. However, they have not solidified their worldviews. Through discussion, middle school students are able to explore their ideas and scaffold each other as they socially construct understandings across difference. If teachers are ignoring this, they are missing a great opportunity to learn about students and have students learn about others and about themselves.

Chapter 7

Outlets

School is not meeting the needs of the participants in my study. Their stories, highlighted in the preceding chapters, unfold accounts of academic experiences governed by a top–down authoritative transmission model of education. McCarthy (1993) argued for critical multiculturalism that promotes democratic initiatives in schooling. McCarthy was particularly concerned with the "pernicious ways in which current curriculum and pedagogical practices . . . militate against minority success and alienate minority students from an academic core curriculum" (p. 299). Listening to my participants' perspectives about their school experiences helped paint a picture of the alienation from core curriculum that the research literature often references (see, for example, Cummins, 1986/2001; Nieto, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999).

When the core curriculum is mismatched to the lives of students, they must look elsewhere to find social, emotional, and intellectual fulfillment. This chapter specifically addresses some of the areas my participants highlighted as important for their sense of engagement. These areas are what I call *outlets*. Outlets are aspects of life where students show passion, where they engage intellectually and emotionally, and where they feel successful.

School does not meet the needs of my participants, yet they are happy, interesting, engaged children. Even though school is boring to them, they still come to school and for the most part are fairly successful. In contrast to the boredom faced in

school, many things are engaging in these children's lives. We need to look at these things and see what they have to offer in terms of school experiences in order to better serve all students. I have identified three types of outlets that were highlighted by my participants: (a) school-based outlets, (b) community-based outlets, and (c) personal outlets. In this chapter I discuss each of these categories that provide my participants with an escape from the overwhelming domination and oppressive boredom experienced in the majority of their school day.

School-Based Outlets

Some examples of outlets in the lives of my participants are based in school. Though they may not be valued as much as the academic core courses by the school administration or by society, they are hugely important to the students. One reason for the popularity of elective classes is that they are one of the few opportunities in school where students can make choices based on personal interests. In addition, these courses are often appreciated because in the electives the students tend to have more hands-on experiences. Similarly, extracurricular activities provide an outlet from the oppressive boredom faced in school. Like electives, extracurricular activities offer students a chance to pursue personal interests, make decisions, and actively engage with their peers in purposeful experiences. Not all school-based outlets are sanctioned by school, as is the case with the third outlet discussed in this section, socializing. Though it is often considered counterproductive by school employees, socializing is an important part of being a teenager and, as you will see in that

subsection, it is considered by many students to be the most alluring aspect of their school experience.

Electives

When discussing what they wanted in school my participants clearly longed for active engagement with curriculum and with their peers. The movie *A Day at School* and the discussions around the movie highlighted instances when students felt engaged and those when they felt disengaged in school. One significant aspect of this movie is that all of the scenes that depict students actively engaged in school are taken from elective courses, while all of the scenes depicting passive students who are bored in school are scenes of core academic courses. In the movie the filmmakers showed scenes of Band, French, and Latin American Studies to depict an environment where children were engaged. In addition, the boy who is interviewed highlights PE as his favorite class. In contrast, the classes depicted in the movie to represent passive students are Algebra and History.

Not only did my participants comment that the elective courses are more enjoyable, they also said that they learn more in them. Tony said in Session 16, "In order to learn you have to have fun." His statement could serve as the mantra for the group when talking about electives. School and society place a much higher value on the core academic courses, a fact that is not lost on my participants. When talking about their movie, Bernice and Thalía pointed out the irony that they learn more in the elective courses.

Bernice: See you actually learn something [in Latin American Studies]. I think I learn more in that class than I learn in Social Studies (laughs). When it should be the opposite.
Me: Why do you think it should be the opposite?
Bernice: Because Social Studies is more important right now than that class. 'Cause it's Social Studies—it's history.
Thalía: Because those are the classes we actually need. We don't need the electives.

To Bernice and Thalía it is ironic that they learn more in the elective classes than they do in the core academic ones. As Bernice aptly stated, "It should be the opposite." They realize that they need to perform well in the core classes to graduate and accomplish their goals of college. Bernice explained later in the same conversation that they feel they learn more in Latin American Studies "because of the way the teacher manages the class." Based on her statements about this class, I believe that this teacher engages her students on a deeper level by getting them active and by addressing topics that are interesting to them. The example in the movie was of a class learning to dance salsa. Later in this discussion Thalía pointed out that the next unit in the class was about Mexican murals and included a class project in which they actually painted a mural.

The students put more effort towards their elective courses partly because they have chosen them based on interest. In addition, they have fun because the teachers design the courses around hands-on activities that allow students to be active and engaged with their peers in meaningful, "real-life" activities. It is unfortunate that these courses are undervalued by society because they clearly provide students with some of the few opportunities they have to experience engagement in school subjects.

I can only conjecture that the reason academic core courses do not follow a similar student-centered structure is because the pressures of accountability are so great that test preparation leaves little room for student choice and hands-on projects.

Extracurricular Activities

Another area where students often find an outlet is extracurricular activities (Nieto, 2000). Like the electives, extracurricular activities offer hands-on experiences that are meaningful and enjoyable for students. Rather than sitting passively listening to teachers and following orders, in extracurricular activities students actively engage with adults and with peers in purposeful endeavors. This provides an answer to the critique my participants offered about the boredom faced during their daily experiences at school.

"I am the best violin player at Live Oak." With all the confidence in the world Tony regularly reported this information to anyone who would listen. He was proud to be first chair violin in the school orchestra. In contrast to a backpack full of books, something that was conspicuously absent from Tony's after-school possessions, he regularly showed up to our after-school sessions toting an instrument borrowed from the orchestra director so he could practice at home. This demonstrated the importance orchestra played in his life. Anyone who has played a musical instrument as a child knows that a violin case is not an accessory one carries down the halls of a middle school for the "coolness factor," meaning Tony has made a conscious decision take this activity seriously. In orchestra Tony feels successful, and he gladly takes the

responsibility to push himself in order to maintain his hard-won status. This includes spending hours of his free time practicing at home.

Similarly, Beth expressed passion for the drama club. “I am writing a play with my friend Kelly about peer pressure; it’s going to be really good,” she told me one day in the cafeteria. In drama Beth is able to collaborate with peers to create works that are relevant to issues that are urgent in the lives of adolescents like her. In her drama activities she is actively engaged not only in a physical sense but also socially and emotionally. Although Beth claimed to like her core academic classes, her face really lit up when speaking about drama club:

> Basically what I want to do with my movie is to show the process of creating a play and the emotions—even freak outs, and the hard work put into it. I want to show the different elements and interactions between actors, techies, and directors to put on a show.

It was her original intention to make her movie about the spring play production, but unfortunately she had to select a different topic when she realized that it would not fit within the schedule for our after-school sessions. What she described is a very complex interaction between students who take on tremendous responsibilities as creators, and their collaboration is imperative to the success of their goal. This type of complex and empowering interaction is absent from most of the school experience, even for Beth, who was in the highest academic track and was the most engaged in school. Imagine the possibilities if students approached all aspects of schooling with such enthusiasm. Beth’s love of drama and particularly the empowerment she felt by being a part of such a deep and meaningful experience led her to select a performing

arts magnet high school over a variety of other magnets that specialized in academic areas.

For Bernice the outlet was soccer. One of the most vocal critics of the fractured and decontextualized experiences in class, Bernice found passion in the girls' soccer team. She approached this activity with so much drive and gusto she became the captain of the team in seventh grade and continued with this duty in eighth grade. Although she expressed a desire to be in my after-school sessions, she made it clear to me before we began that she would not be able to miss too many practices. After clearing it with the coach she agreed to miss one practice a week so she could participate in my study. The ability to stand out as a leader, to feel a part of a team, and to have fun are all reasons Bernice enjoyed soccer as an outlet.

Orchestra, drama club, and soccer are three examples from a broad range of possibilities for students in middle school. Other options include debating club, cheerleading, basketball, and a host of others. Many students at Live Oak take advantage of the opportunity to participate in one or more of these after-school activities. What these opportunities offer, an ingredient that is often missing in the regular school day, is choice based on interest; active engagement with peers; authentic responsibilities; and purposeful, goal-oriented activities. For these reasons Tony, Beth, and Bernice put so much of themselves into their extracurricular experiences. The value placed on these experiences by students and the dedication the children exhibit towards their goals have much to offer those in charge of designing academic curriculum. It would be wonderful if these children would dedicate

themselves in academic areas with the enthusiasm they do for their extracurricular activities.

Socializing

In the face of extreme boredom and teacher domination in school students also find outlets that are not curricular and not officially sanctioned. One of these is socializing. For adolescents, socializing takes on a heightened importance (Pitton, 2001) and is often seen by school administrators as problematic. Rather than recognize socializing as a developmental need for young people, school staff often treat it as a disruption that must be controlled and squashed.

Sonia and Jaqueline are like two peas in a pod. They have been best friends for their entire lives. At age 14 it is as if they are joined at the hip. "Estan como chicle [they are like gum]. Man. They always stick together," remarked Ines, reflecting on the enduring friendship of these two girls. The closeness of Sonia and Jaqueline stands out, especially now, because middle school dispersed the old elementary school social groups like a twister ripping through a small town.

Before the middle school tornado hit, my fifth-grade class was like a family living in a small town. The 21 students who made up this group had lived together 6 hours a day for 7 years. Since they were the only bilingual class on the grade level, these same children had been grouped together since prekindergarten, their entire school careers. When this group entered my fifth-grade class they had grown up together, knew intimate details of each other's personal histories, and had formed

longstanding friendships, much like might be imagined in a small town. This dynamic has a wonderful implication. The children were so familiar with each other that they seemed to be able to act naturally without the fear they might have had around strangers. In fact, they knew each other so well it was as if they could finish each other's sentences.

However, this dynamic also has a down side. Since they knew each other so well, they really could finish each other's sentences, and that can get old. Although the children did have closely knit social ties with many of their peers, the larger social atmosphere of the class felt stagnant and suffocating. Their interactions took on the proportions of sibling rivalry. As the year progressed, Tony, who fancied himself a comedian, increasingly was met with rolling eyes and, "Oh shut up," each time he opened his mouth. So deeply entrenched were their impressions of each other, there was little hope of ever breaking away. Tony was the clown, so there was no chance for him to offer a serious thought. The others had their stories, too; for example, Sonia was the brain, and Griselda was the shy one. For each of them, the idea of who they were was not in their own hands but in the collective consciousness of a group that used historical evidence dating back to when they were 4 years old to set their beliefs in stone.

Entering the large middle school provided an infusion of new blood and thus the long-awaited opportunity to create a new social self. The days of small-town, bilingual fifth grade quickly faded into nostalgic memory, making way for the bustle of middle school life. Friendships that such a short time ago seemed to be eternal

transformed into an occasional nod in the hallway between classes. Exploring their possibilities, the students found new social niches.

Although the different students branched out and entered new friendships, what they all had in common was the extreme importance placed on socializing. Sonia and Jaqueline exemplified this phenomenon. Somehow managing to stick together, they traversed the grand social scene as partners in crime. In fact, socializing is often seen as "crime" in middle school. Both Sonia and Jaqueline described getting in trouble, including detention and calls home, for excessive talking in class. However, a little hassle from the adults did not deter them from pursuing their fascination with socializing.

Early in our after-school sessions, partnering with Ines who is also still a friend, they made the easy decision to focus their moviemaking efforts on their favorite thing about school; the social scene. Throughout the course of their project it was hard for me to determine when they were "working" on their movie and when they were socializing. It seemed that the topic, the cameras, and the laptops were pivots that the 3 girls used to extend their social "play."

A fly on the wall in Session 6 would report hearing hysterical laughter and shouts from 3 girls huddled around a laptop. This was the first day that Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline downloaded the footage they had filmed onto a computer. They watched as the video was transferred from tape to hard drive. When we think of young people spending hours watching videos, the image that arises is often one of passive children sitting on a couch staring blankly at a screen. Nothing could be

further from what was actually taking place when the 3 girls watched their footage for the first time. As the scenes flashed in front of them a multilevel conversation was occurring between the girls and the footage as well as among the girls. The footage functioned like an instant replay on Monday Night Football; they relived their day's actions and used them as an organizational aid to recount stories.

"You suck," with her pointer finger stabbing the air just inches from the screen Sonia yelled at the image of a boy who appeared in front of her. Thalía, who was at another table but could catch the action out of the corner of her eye, saw a friend appear on the video. "Do you know her brother's name? It's Dallas!" she said, tickled that a boy would be named after a city.

"Ok, this is where my boyfriend comes in," Sonia told the others in a sassy tone that communicated that it was not really her boyfriend but a boy she thinks is cute.

Jaqueline, who can read between the lines of Sonia's comments, replied, "No your boyfriend came in before that."

Remembering another cute boy, Sonia voiced agreement with a simple, "Oh yeah." They were obviously delighted to have this menagerie of boys flashing in front of them captured exclusively for the purpose of their verbal pleasure.

"Why do you tape a lot of your boyfriends?" asked Ines, not wanting to be left out of the conversation.

"Oh, it's hard with all her boyfriends, man." Jaqueline sarcastically offered in a voice that sounded like a movie star. At this all of the girls broke into a chorus of uncontrollable laughter.

"You kids stop," from a nearby table Thalía mocked them in a motherly tone. But they could not stop because the images were too provocative. With each scene the conversation shifted from cute boys to scandalous girls, and of course back to cute boys. Friends and foes were discussed as their digital images paraded by and even the filmmakers made cameos on the screen. "Thank you for flipping me off, Ines," remarked Jaqueline. Ines was leaning off the side of her chair laughing. "I was gonna do it," she remarked as if sticking her middle finger in front of the camera would have been a daring transgression.

Before addressing my interpretation of this exchange it is worth a reminder that these are the same girls who complained about school being boring. Listening to them talk about school left the impression that it was about as mind-numbingly dull as watching grass grow. The footage they just finished watching was of events that transpired during the school day; however, the girls were anything but bored while watching and discussing the footage. Of course, what they filmed were interactions between students largely outside of class, mostly in the cafeteria. It seems that there may be a key hidden within all of this.

For Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline the social scene at school provides an outlet from the monotony of the daily grind. Socializing in the cafeteria infuses life into a day filled with teacher domination and passive classroom experiences. Capturing the

scene on video allowed the opportunity to extend what they already cherish doing: talking about all of the social interactions they had during the day. The video footage was used like an instant replay and served to guide and contextualize their socializing. It was a pivot that facilitated their talk about the cute boys and the drama between girls as the actual players were appearing before them. The vivaciousness of the girls as they approached this topic showed a passion that unfortunately often goes untapped in other areas of schooling.

In Session 9 the girls were slightly farther along in their editing process. They had viewed the footage various times and were working to organize the clips into a coherent movie. Although the footage was no longer novel, their enthusiasm for interacting with it had not waned. On this particular day Sonia was at her Bible study group, so Jaqueline and Ines were left to work on the laptop. Chewing wads of gum, the two girls stared at the computer screen.

"I want to see this. Yes, yes, yes. Hold on, let me see this real fast," with a mischievous smile Ines acted as if she had never seen this scene before, when she had watched it upwards of 50 times. Pressing play, Ines laughed and held up her middle finger as if the kid in the video were really in front of her and could see her vulgar display. "I want to see that again," said Ines when the short scene had finished playing.

"Why, 'cause you like attitude?" Jaqueline inquired.

"No. I don't like him 'cause his attitude and stuff. I like him 'cause his body," Ines's words became inaudible but her hand gesture finished the thought. She held her fingers to her thumb like a cook might after tasting a culinary delight.

Looking a little shocked at Ines's boldness, Jaqueline shook her head and simply said, "No!"

Though they have been looking at the footage for weeks, they never seemed to tire from watching it. With each viewing they found different ways to elaborate on the same subjects, the most popular of which seemed to be cute boys. It was almost as if using the video in this way provided a safe manner to approach the topic of boys without the danger, or implications, of dealing with them in person. Ines could wave her finger at this boy on the screen and tell Jaqueline that she thinks he has a nice body, something she would not do to his face. To the computer she does not hazard the humiliation of rejection, nor does she run the risk of being labeled "easy."

The girls were engaged with each other and with the footage in front of them. They showed a strong interest in the material and were active in their dealings with it. However, minutes later, when I approached to check on them, the whole dynamic changed. I wanted to make sure they were "on task," that they had a plan, and that they did not need any help.

"I just want to get an idea of what you guys are doing and where you are in your whole thing. Ok?" I asked.

Sitting up straight in their chairs, the smiles drained from their faces, Jaqueline replied, "We're making a video." The girls looked at each other and smiled

mischievously at Jaqueline's short and obvious response. She did not end her sentence with "duh," but it was clearly implied. Each of my probing questions was met with answers of one or two words. I got the feeling that I was a torturer in an interrogation session and my victims were not about to squeal.

"How are things going?"

"Fine."

"You have an idea of what you are doing?"

"Yes."

"What do you have left to do?"

"Everything."

As I asked questions the girls, slouched in their chairs, were obviously uncomfortable and uneasy. They fidgeted with things on the table and with each other's hands. Never making eye contact with me, they offered their one-word responses and smirked while looking at the other's reaction out of the corner of their eyes. If they were cartoon characters they would have had thought bubbles floating over their heads with the words, "When is he going to leave?"

By approaching them and asking questions about their movie project, I had interrupted the flow of their socializing "work." My questions seem to have changed their project for the moment into one that more closely resembled schoolwork and was no longer fun. I was surprised that they would react this way when the project was of a topic that they chose and obviously one they held close to their hearts. Part of my shock stemmed from the fact that just 3 years ago, when these two were in my

class, they would have died to have my undivided attention. If I had approached them during small-group work and asked about what they were doing, the fifth-grade Jaqueline and Ines would have talked my ear off; I would have had to cut them short promising to return after I checked on the other children in the class. It seemed they had entered a new phase in their development, adolescence, and interactions between peers had become elevated above pleasing the adults. Although I was doing the "good" teacherly thing, it ended up stifling their agenda.

The moviemaking experience for Sonia, Jaqueline, and Ines was an opportunity to explore an outlet they hold dear, while engaging in the very activities they enjoy from this outlet. As I stated earlier, it was often hard to know if the 3 girls were "working" or "playing" when they engaged with the moviemaking equipment. They were socializing about socializing. If this study had been done in an early childhood context, the working and playing would be considered one and the same. The girls' "play" would be thought of as an opportunity for them to rehearse real-life experiences that are currently on their minds, to work through important and complex issues, and to scaffold each other as they socially construct understandings of the world around them (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline are early adolescents entering a new world and exploring issues that they never before found interesting. Though the issues of cute boys and drama between girls are quite different from the issues addressed by preschool children, the process of playing to organize and rehearse seems to parallel. If schools ignore this incredible pull to be

social or use authoritarian means as an attempt to control it, then schools are not working in a developmentally appropriate way for their students.

Electives, extracurricular activities, and socializing are three school-based outlets my participants highlighted that serve to keep school interesting. These outlets are cherished by the students because they provide children with opportunities to be active; to make decisions; to be engaged physically, socially, and intellectually; and to have fun while learning. These areas are worthy of study because they serve to brighten up a much larger school experience that is overshadowed by an oppressive and stifling boredom. It is good that children can find some outlets in school; however, it is a shame that the rest of their school day is not met with similar enthusiasm. As researchers, we must look for ways to bridge the energy students have for the outlets to the academic areas of schooling.

Community-Based Outlets

Students also find engagement outside of school. Often these outside-school interactions are positive experiences that help students persist in their education. Nieto (2000) related a case study of a teenager named Marisol who described her involvement in volunteer work at a teen clinic as an outlet that helped keep her focused in school even though the school structure was often mismatched from her culture. Marisol was not involved in school activities (like clubs or sports) but considered her work at the clinic to be like "a vaccine against pregnancy," an educational obstacle for many girls at her school (p. 160).

In this section I discuss three areas outside of school that I call community-based outlets: (a) family, (b) church, and (c) hanging out in the neighborhood. Although none of the following data are directly related to my participants' school experiences, they are areas where my students find engagement in their lives. The sense of belonging and the guidance from adults that Bernice, Griselda, Sonia, and Joe find in these community-based outlets help to build their self-confidence. Therefore, these experiences likely keep them focused in school similar to the way Nieto (2000) described the role of the clinic for Marisol. In the case of my participants who reported experiencing disengagement in school, efforts to bridge school experiences to the community-based outlets would be beneficial. A start would be to become familiar with children's lives outside of school.

Family

"What exactly do I need to be able to go to college?" Bernice asked me in the parking lot on a spring afternoon. It was after one of our sessions, and she was waiting for her older sister to pick her up and take her home. Bernice had just finished telling me that she could not wait to be in high school and out of the magnet program, but this has not thwarted her dreams of going to college. She does not have a concrete idea in her head about how to get accepted into college, but she already has the feeling that it is going to be a long and unpleasant road. She is aware that personal sacrifices and distractions line the road, she has already had a taste of them in middle school and is trying to get mentally prepared for the last leg of the journey through

high school. Like a child getting ready to take her medicine she braces herself, anticipating the worst.

Bernice knows that I go to the university, and she was mining me for information to cross-check with her other sources. Her primary source for guidance in navigating her school experiences and planning her academic future are her grownup sisters. Bernice has two sisters who have both attended some college. Since her parents did not attend school in the United States and never went to college, Bernice looks to her sisters for support that is specific to educational issues. In fact, this is a role that her sisters have been performing for years. When Bernice was in third grade her mother always brought along one of her eldest offspring to our parent–teacher conferences. The young women acted as interpreters for their mother, only they were dealing with a language barrier, since our meetings were conducted in Spanish. The two sisters were cultural and educational translators for their mother. The sisters had been through public school in the United States, and Bernice's mom was now doing everything she could to insure her third daughter would do the same.

> My oldest sister, Imelda, started at Rio Grande [the local community college], but she got married and had a baby then she had to drop out. . . . Guadalupe [the middle sister] spent 2 years at UT, but it was too expensive. Now she works at the bank, but she says she wants to go back to college and finish.

Bernice's older sisters not only give her specific information like test-taking strategies and homework help, they also talk about their personal experiences and try to help Bernice stay focused on her goal. Bernice explained that both of her sisters regret not having finished college and talk about going back. Bernice sees how

difficult this has been for them, seems to doubt that either of them will finish, and hopes to avoid some of the obstacles to education that they faced. Bernice's family is an outlet that helps her stay focused on her ultimate goal, and they help her as she trudges ahead through a school experience that might otherwise be easy to abandon as too tedious and irrelevant.

In a different sort of way Griselda's family also acts as an outlet in her life. Similar to Bernice, Griselda's parents did not go to school in the United States. The family came to Texas from Mexico when Griselda was in third grade, and her mother and father speak little English. Although they are not familiar with the education system here, they make a point to show a strong presence in their children's schools. They are always present for conferences with teachers and escort Griselda to and from school each day. This is no easy feat since they both work long hours, her father driving a taco truck and mother cleaning houses.

Unlike Bernice, she does not have older sisters paving the way and offering academic counseling. Griselda is the older sister; she has two younger sisters (one in sixth grade and one in second) and a baby brother who is not yet school age. Besides being the academic scout for the family, paving the way for her younger siblings, Griselda's responsibilities include taking care of her younger siblings when her parents are at work.

Extremely soft spoken, Griselda rarely talks in school. Although she was in my class for 2 years, I can count on one hand how many times I have actually heard her speak, and her voice is never above a whisper. This attribute has carried over to

her middle school experience and was true in our after-school sessions. Although she does not talk much, she is a conscientious student who always does her work. Though she never spoke during our group discussions, she was an active participant and contributor in small-group work with her friends Bernice and Thalía.

When Griselda does speak she is more comfortable talking in her native language, Spanish. The fact that she is so quiet makes it easy for a girl like Griselda to slip through the cracks and go unnoticed by her teachers. On a cold January day I ate lunch with Griselda. I literally had to lean across the table with my ear inches from her mouth to hear her whispers above the roar of the cafeteria. "El año pasado tuve que ir a Mexico porque mi abuelita estaba enferma [Last year I had to go to Mexico because my grandmother was sick]." Like many of my participants, Griselda's family transcends national boundaries. They continue to have close ties to loved ones in Mexico. Her grandmother, who still lives in the ranch town where Griselda's parents grew up, became ill and the entire family went to visit. They went during Christmas vacation, as they do every year, but this time they extended their stay because it was possibly the last time they would see her father's mother.

"We stayed in Santa Ana for 3 months. I was going to go to school there, but the teachers didn't want to work so the school was closed." Griselda went on to explain that since school was not an option she spent her time at the ranch helping around the house and playing with her cousins who still live in the town. "When I got back to Live Oak they said I missed too much school and I had to repeat seventh grade." Griselda whispered her story in a matter-of-fact way, recounting the events

and the consequences without bitterness. Although her parents were upset that Griselda had to repeat the grade, they never considered arguing their case with the school administration. This is not surprising because they are unfamiliar with the school system here and do not speak English. They felt they had no choice but to accept the lot that was handed to their daughter.

Although this story may seem like family ties have been an educational obstacle for Griselda, that analysis is too simple. Different from the other examples of outlets, Griselda's story does not necessarily show an escape that she pursues for enjoyment or direct educational benefits. However, I believe that the sense of responsibility and connectedness that she gains from her familial interactions help her to build a mature outlook on life. She faces her struggles in school and in life with a great deal of maturity that energizes her to endure. It is a shame that there is no support network to advocate for Griselda in school. She has a tight and supportive family and is a conscientious and hardworking student, yet school does not seem to recognize these strengths.

Family is an important outlet for many of my participants. The stories of Bernice and Griselda help to illustrate what Nieto (2000) called "the powerful influence of family on Latino culture" (p. 260). Schools would better serve students if they actively sought ways to bring families into the school experiences, even when they do not appear to fit mainstream society's definition of supportive or "educated." Nieto (2000) pointed out, "Even families in difficult circumstances want the best for their children, but often they are unaware of how to provide for them" (pp. 260-261).

If schools took the responsibility to recognize this point and be supportive, children like Bernice and Griselda would have a better idea of what to do to avoid some of the obstacles they face on the road to their goal of a college education.

Church

If only I had a penny for all the times in the teacher's lounge I have heard someone say, "I feel so sorry for Sonia, she has to go to the library during the class party because her family is Jehovah's Witnesses." In elementary school Sonia was one of less than a handful of children whose families are Jehovah's Witnesses. Each year her parents would bring a small amount of literature for Sonia's new teacher simply to inform her or him what to expect from a student who follows this religion. Obviously if a parent is compelled to bring literature to his/her child's teacher, then this is an important aspect of the family's life.

School can be a pretty secular environment, and the religion of each child often goes unnoticed. In the case of the Jehovah's Witness elementary school child, it is generally noticed but equally ignored. By ignoring such a major influence on a child's life, the teacher misses an opportunity to know the student. Based on my experience with Sonia, two obvious things set the Jehovah's Witness child apart from other children in the class: (a) no Pledge of Allegiance and (b) no parties. Left at that, the teacher has a superficial understanding of the importance of the religion in the life of the child. Scratch the surface and you find an outlet that instills a strong sense of belonging and a strong moral compass.

A Jehovah's Witness child will not stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. Sonia, like other Jehovah's Witnesses, will not make oaths to anyone but God. Imagine an auditorium filled with all of the teachers and children of an elementary school. The principal gets up on the stage; the U.S. flag is hanging above her head. With microphone in hand she instructs the audience, "Now boys and girls, please rise for the pledge." Hundreds of children and their teachers push themselves up to their feet and in unison begin to say the familiar words, "I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America…" By the end of kindergarten the routine is so rote the children no longer wonder about the meaning of the word *indivisible* (or more likely why the flag is "invisible"). Something they do notice and wonder about is why that little girl in the third-grade class is still sitting cross-legged on the floor with her lips pressed together. By third grade Sonia already knew this routine and tried to sit as still as possible, with a polite expression on her face, and not make eye contact with the many people who directed accusatory glances in her direction. She hoped that her pleasant expression would explain sufficiently that her sitting is not an act of disobedience to the principal, nor an anti-American conspiracy. The other children in our class never seemed to tire of asking her why she sits for the pledge. "It is against my religion," was her simple answer. I am sure Sonia knew that it would have been easier to stand and blend in with the rest of the students, but she was very aware this would not be acceptable in the eyes of her parents and her church.

Sonia felt a similar gaze upon her each time the class paused the academic routine for a class party. Giving names like "Fall Festival" or "Winter Celebration"

was a thinly veiled attempt to avoid the stigma of Halloween and Christmas in order to allow Sonia to participate in the class festivities. However, when party time came, she would gather up some seatwork or art supplies and head off to the library in a self-imposed exile. Often another student secretly would slip her a cupcake on her way out the door. I am sure Sonia was not overjoyed by being banished to the library each year when her classmates were celebrating, but she never complained. She seemed to accept this as part of her life, something that set her apart from the others.

I believe that the isolation she may have felt during the pledge and during class parties was far outweighed by the sense of purpose she gained from her church experiences. Her actions based on the doctrine of her church and the wishes of her parents were clearly laid out for her, and she followed them in no uncertain terms. If she felt left out at times in school, she also had times in her life outside of school when she fit in. When she is at church and at the youth group run by the church, she is among people who share her beliefs.

Sonia continued to participate actively in the Jehovah's Witnesses youth group in the eighth grade. Once a week she would miss our after-school sessions to participate in a long-standing commitment to this organization. With other children her age she engaged in Bible study and volunteer activities like visiting people in an old-age home. When she was with her youth group she did not have to constantly explain herself and her religious practices, something I imagine must have been a relief for her. This is a place where she really fits in.

For Sonia, the Jehovah's Witness church is an outlet. In school she has always stood out as different from the majority of children. She is forced to explain why she does not participate in the group activities like the pledge and class parties. But when she is with her church members she can be herself and is surrounded by young people who are being reared like her. This experience fills a need for a sense of belonging and helps solidify a strong moral compass that serves her to resist possible negative peer pressures. Although she may not see it as an outlet in the same sense she does socializing, church provides Sonia with a structure of support, a clearly defined code by which to live, and a network of adults and young people her age with whom she can identify.

Hanging Out in the Neighborhood

"I'm gonna let you shoot solids," the deep voice of the shaved headed man sounds as smooth as Barry White. He assesses the situation on the table as he chalks the tip of his cue stick.

"No, I want stripes." Although the same height as his opponent, Joe's voice registers a few keys higher, and his excited tone gives away the fact that he is thrilled to be playing with his best friend's father. This man who exudes "cool" is schooling Joe in the grownup game of pool.

"The one who gets one in gets to decide." The man knows the game that Joe wants to learn. Joe, who sports a peach fuzz mustache and stands 5'11", looks older

than 14 and thirsts to be seen as an adult. He is interested in pool both because he sees it as something men do and because this man he knows only as “Mister” plays it.

“Oh yeah, I know,” responding to Mr’s explanation, Joe acted like he knew all along how to determine who plays which ball. It was as if his previous utterance were just a momentary lapse of attention. Though he was still learning the rules of the game, Joe wanted to save face in front of his friend’s dad.

The man circled the table and with a crack his stick sent the cue ball gliding across the green velvet, sinking one striped ball after another. Joe focused the camera on the configuration of billiards left on the table, most of them solids. “So far he’s winning and I haven’t even scored a single ball.” Young Joe’s voice revealed admiration as he addressed the imaginary audience watching the video.

The man offered some words of support for Joe, “It’s alright, you’re just learning. Here, I’ll take your next shot for you.”

“No, I’ll do it,” objected Joe, eager to prove himself. He might not be good, but he was determined to hold his own.

The man Joe called “Mr” lives across the street with his two sons, who are Joe’s closest friends. The boys spend most of their free time in the garage playing pool or in the driveway playing basketball. The boys’ father spends a great deal of time with all three boys. Since Joe’s father is in prison, this man seems to fill a void for adult male companionship that Joe desperately wants. This man welcomes Joe into his household and takes an active role teaching him the finer points of each game.

Joe filmed this slice of his life for a movie he wanted to make about his home life. Interactions like this are frequent for Joe and his buddies. When they are not practicing pool or basketball, they often walk to a neighborhood schoolyard and look for a pick-up game of soccer. Usually on weekends, teenagers and men meet at the field, form teams, and play ball. On the field Joe gets to rub elbows with the older men and catch glimpses into adulthood.

Because these activities are not organized in a strict sense, they often go under the radar of what we researchers may consider outlets for young people. The reason I include hanging out in the neighborhood as an outlet for Joe is because this is where he shows passion. During these activities, Joe gains something that is largely missing from his school experience. When he is hanging out, Joe has the opportunity to have positive interactions with adult men in a very different form than the interactions he has with his teachers. At school he is a kid and teachers tell him what to do. It is a top–down interaction, and the things he is asked to do he does not see as meaningful. In the neighborhood he is engaged in experiences he genuinely desires to learn, and the adults act as "expert" guides who scaffold his learning while he is engaged in authentic tasks with them. If Joe had similar role models and experiences in school, it would be a much more engaging place, and he would see it as more meaningful for him as an individual.

Personal Outlets: DeAndre and Yu-Gi-Oh

Perhaps the strongest example of the significance of outlets is found with DeAndre. Of all of the participants, DeAndre's story illustrates the worst fit between curriculum and person. DeAndre does not have access to the school-based or the community-based outlets in the way the other participants do. He has found different way to fill the void: popular culture. DeAndre uses an intense passion for Yu-Gi-Oh as a personal outlet where he finds success, intellectual engagement, power, and community, none of which are present in his daily school experiences.

Heart of the Cards

If it is 4:00 p.m., DeAndre is his bedroom watching reruns of his favorite cartoon, Yu-Gi-Oh. Yu-Gi-Oh is a Japanese anime cartoon about a group of children who wield magical cards that unleash dragons and other monsters to battle bad guys who have kidnapped the grandfather of the protagonist, Yugi. The question is whether the help of his friends and his undying belief in "the heart of the cards" will be enough for Yugi to free his grandfather from the clutches of the powerful villain Maximillion Pegasus.

However, rather than a passively watched TV show, this is not merely a cartoon, it is a way of life. Yu-Gi-Oh is big business and interwoven with the television show is a complex mathematical card game that pits players against each other with decks of monster cards that contain various levels of power, depending on

their rarity. For example, the blue-eyed white dragon is extremely rare. A card like that can cost upwards of $15 at a Yu-Gi-Oh tournament.

DeAndre, who is not a novice to the game, has a couple of blue-eyed dragons and a host of other cards, the most valuable of which he guards in a special shoebox that sits atop his dresser next to the television. The card-filled shoebox is not the only Yu-Gi-Oh paraphernalia that DeAndre owns. His small room is a shrine to the cult of Yu-Gi-Oh, its four walls plastered with posters of dragons and charts explaining the unfathomable power of the rarest cards. Magazines dedicated to this passion are strewn about on every surface along with his own drawings of dragons and other monsters, some copied from the show and others his own creations.

Next to his bed DeAndre keeps notebooks containing pages filled with handwritten lists of every deck he has assembled. Chronologically and thematically organized are earth, water, and fire decks with the names, attributes, attack points, defense points, and strength levels of all the monsters that made up each respective assemblage. His lists date back years, and now he can review the original ones with the eyes of a seasoned expert and chuckle about his youthful naïveté. These records that took meticulous attention and tremendous knowledge to create would make the best archivist green with envy. They serve him well; through careful study of his dueling history DeAndre has made a name for himself in the neighborhood as a formidable dueling opponent. The list of admiring competitors includes young people from a variety of ages. Of course, elementary school boys are in awe of DeAndre's card slinging bravado, but so older boys. Even his friend Tony's older brother Luis,

who attends the local community college, recognizes DeAndre's virtuosity in the game.

When there is a commercial break, DeAndre is likely sorting through his vast card collection working up a strategy for his next duel with neighborhood children or even for the tournament that is held on Saturdays at a shopping mall across town. After the show he sometimes plays basketball at the Recreational Center with Tony and Fransisco. The basketball games never last long, because at a place like the Rec. Center a naïve fifth or sixth grader is likely to walk by, an irresistible opportunity for DeAndre. Without missing a beat he will swoop his deck out of his pocket and be bartering a trade, perhaps Obelisk the Tormentor (a hugely powerful monster that can knock off 4,000 life points off an opponent in one attack*)* for an Injection Fairy Lily (a curvaceous red-haired vixen in a nurse's uniform sitting atop a giant syringe; according to DeAndre, she "is hot"). It is hard to say if DeAndre is taking advantage of these younger children, who perhaps do not realize the comparative values of the cards, or if he is taking the boys under his wing and providing them with a little street Yu-Gi-Oh mentorship. Either way, as DeAndre would say, it's all about "the heart of the cards."

Mostly the three friends like to pass time down by the creek that snakes through the woods at the end of their cul-de-sac. This has been their stomping ground for as long as they can remember. Every Monday, when they were in third grade, I could count on endless stories of their creek adventures that would eat away at my precious instructional time. Here they find straight sticks to fashion into swords and

battle each other or use them to defend the world against Maximillion Pegasus and his evil cronies. When they need a break they can rest at their clubhouse, a grove of hackberry trees that nature positioned perfectly with roots and trunks intertwining to form a secret hideout. Pulling cards from the pockets of their blue jeans, the hideout offers a fine place for a makeshift duel.

The fact is, for DeAndre and Tony, anywhere is a fine place for a makeshift duel. This became painfully (for me) evident in our after-school sessions. No matter what my plans were for our afternoons together, the boys had an almost impossible time resisting the decks of dueling cards that seemed to call to them from their pockets and backpacks. It almost became a joke. Each time I started a discussion I would stop and say to one of them, "If you don't put those cards away right now I am going to take them from you." Whoever was the culprit would reply, "Ok, Ok, just one minute," or "But I can look at the cards and listen, too." Eventually they would begrudgingly put the cards away, but not for long. I got the feeling that hearing empty threats from a teacher about taking their cards away was about as familiar a sound as the ringing of a school bell.

The problem of cards being a distraction was exacerbated when my participants began editing their movies. DeAndre, Tony, and Joe all chose to work individually on movies about their home lives. I could not round up enough laptop computers to get the girls' groups and all of the boys on separate computers, so the solution was for the boys to take turns editing their footage. This always left a couple of boys with down time as they waited their turn. In Session 11 Tony was first to have

his turn editing on the laptop. I asked Joe to operate the video camera to film our session, and this left DeAndre and Fransisco sitting at a nearby table waiting. Normally I gave them little activities to help them plan out their movies while they were not editing. On this particular day Thalía, Bernice, and Griselda had some technical problems and I was busy helping them. I had not had time to set the boys up with a sponge activity, so DeAndre and Fransisco were left to their own devices. They immediately had stacks of cards on the table and began a duel. These duels are not suitable for a library; the participants tend to be lively and verbally expressive. Realizing that Joe was operating a camera to help me with my dissertation data, DeAndre took it upon himself to educate me about the game. He called Joe over and began to explain the dueling process in scientific detail for the camera.

Tony, who is no Yu-Gi-Oh slouch and delights in arguing the subtleties of this complex game, heard the commotion and began to yell across the room, "Come on. Why would you explain about fusion monsters first?" By Tony's standards DeAndre was not doing an adequate job explaining Yu-Gi-Oh to a novice. DeAndre ignored the comments from his friend and, carefully placing the blue cards in front of him, said, "When you start you will have five cards face down . . ."

This was too much to take. Tony slammed down his hand on the table. "Oh, come on. He's not explaining it right," he whined, in a voice hitting notes that can only be achieved by a 14-year-old boy. In a flash he was out of his chair, moving toward the Yu-Gi-Oh action, and pulling his own deck from his pocket. "Let me try,"

Tony said as he took a seat next to DeAndre. Tony drew five cards, "First you draw five cards from your deck . . ."

"I was saying that, you piece of crap," DeAndre interjected in an offended tone.

Tony ignored the critique of his explanation. "See, I have three monsters and two traps. Traps you can put face down on the field."

Again DeAndre objected, "I ain't even getting it all, 'cause you're going too freakin' fast." It seemed that editing the home life movies was now just a distant memory.

Twenty minutes later when I finished helping the girls with their computer woes, the 4 boys were still going strong. They had addressed fusion monsters, power levels of different cards, summonsing, polymerization, and many of the other finer points of Yu-Gi-Oh. When I approached they were crowded around the video camera arguing about the best way to explain attack points. They had devised an odd but effective style of collaboration, first arguing and then taking turns, alternating between roles as cameraman and reporter. Across the room was one laptop alone on a desk with nobody editing. Foolishly, I still believed they would be eager to get to work on their own movies. Figuring that Tony's time was up I offered the free computer to Joe or DeAndre, but there were no takers. After both boys politely declined my invitation, I asked why they did not want to work on editing their movies.

Me: Do you guys still want to finish the movies that you are working on?

DeAndre: Not me.
(The other boys nod their heads in agreement.)
Me: Tell me what happened, because you didn't even want to work on your movie today, so I'm just curious like why not?
DeAndre: I don't know.
Tony: It's because you are not always in the mood.
Joe: Sometimes you're like in a bad mood or you're just tired.
Tony: You just don't want to do something that you do everyday that you don't—
Me: (laughing) OK, like play Yu-Gi-Oh cards?
Tony: Yu-Gi-Oh is addicting.
DeAndre: With Yu-Gi-Oh I can do—
Joe: Whatever you want—
DeAndre: I can do a movie about Yu-Gi-Oh and stuff like that because—
Tony: We know about it—
DeAndre: —I know more about it. And that's what I do mostly every day. But other stuff, like what I've been recording, is kind of like what I don't do every day. And stuff like that. I mean my friends everyday and everything like that but more what I do—Yu-Gi-Oh is mostly what I do with my brother, with my friends, with the people at school.

Joe's statement, "Sometimes you're in a bad mood or you're just tired," demonstrated the place Yu-Gi-Oh holds in their lives. It is an outlet that allows them to escape the sometimes depressing reality of being a teenager. Playing Yu-Gi-Oh is a way to relax and take their minds off their daily lives, much the way a college professor might come home from work, pour a glass of wine, and watch *E.R.* Tony corroborated Joe's statement by saying, "You just don't want to do something that you do every day," meaning Yu-Gi-Oh is an outlet from the monotony of daily life. This routine includes boring schoolwork, which it seemed the "home life" videos were beginning to feel like for them. DeAndre explained this well when he juxtaposed the confidence he would feel making a movie about Yu-Gi-Oh, something

he "know[s] more about," and his home life movie, which he considered, "what I *don't* do every day."

When the boys selected to make movies about their home lives I was thrilled, because I thought it was the ultimate topic for a child-centered experience where only they could be the "experts." I believed it had to be culturally relevant teaching, since they would be in charge of representing their own lives using their own "funds of knowledge" (Moll et al., 1992). However, once they began the process of making the movies the work became just another school-like assignment that they were completing because I asked them to do it. Yu-Gi-Oh is the passion they would highlight if given the freedom to make a movie of their choosing. After all, it is what they do with their brothers, with their friends, and "with the people at school." If making a movie is about educating others, then Yu-Gi-Oh was the topic the boys felt most confident explaining.

It was decided right there that the boys would put their home life movies on hold and work together to make a movie about Yu-Gi-Oh. The boys left that session with a newfound excitement about what they were doing. I mourned the loss of the home life movies, something I still believed would have been the ideal topic for generating data for my dissertation. Yu-Gi-Oh, on the other hand, was something I did not particularly care for; to me it was little more than a thinly veiled marketing ploy designed to take advantage of the consumerist tendencies of American boys. However, my doubts about the relevance of Yu-Gi-Oh were appeased in the

following weeks when I saw the enthusiasm, dedication, and collaborative fervor that arose when the boys approached their favorite topic.

With little time left in our schedule of meetings the boys dedicated Sessions 12–15 to the planning, filming, and editing of the Yu-Gi-Oh video. All of the boys showed an amazing degree of focus and enthusiasm for the project, but none matched the unwavering conviction of DeAndre, who clearly emerged as the group leader.

DeAndre was the leader not only because he was the most knowledgeable about the game, but also because he approached the movie project like he was on a mission to educate the world about his passion. Almost without fail he was the first to arrive for our meetings. I was afraid to ask how he sometimes managed to get there before the last school bell rang. Each time he came toting a host of materials he thought might assist his group in their efforts. He brought his notebooks, his shoebox of special decks, and scraps of paper where he had jotted down ideas for possible scenes.

On the afternoon of Session 13 DeAndre brought something very special to share with his group. When he arrived he was waving a floppy disk in the air and asked if he could show it. We put it in the computer, and the boys and I crowded around the screen to see what it was. DeAndre opened up a Powerpoint presentation that he made entitled, “The Strongest Yu-Gi-Oh Cards.” The presentation was a stunning 32 slides completely animated with flying letters and sound effects. Each slide had pictures that he downloaded from the Internet along with extensive explanations that he wrote from memory. This was a real research project that went

from general to specific and covered topics including dragon cards, polymerization, ritual cards, and the steps for fusion and dueling. We looked on in awe at the amount of information presented and the remarkable organization of so much material, to say nothing of the aesthetic manner in which it was displayed. DeAndre sat proudly in front of the computer screen, basking in the glory of the shower of compliments we bestowed upon him. Clearly he was the Yu-Gi-Oh master and we were graced to be his apprentices.

Although 14-year-old boys are known to have a rocky time collaborating in small groups, DeAndre's leadership was never questioned. This is due in part to the fact that he took great care to be fair and democratic when divvying up the tasks of explaining the various aspects of the game. In Session 14, for example, he worked with the others to devise a list of all of the scenes they would have in their movie. On the page he called "the blueprints" he wrote the name of each section, followed by the name of the person who would be in charge of explaining it, and finally the approximate time it should take to give the explanation.

Once they brainstormed a list of all of the nuances of the game that must be included in the film, DeAndre had an idea for an interesting way they could present the information. "How about this, we do it like a newspaper—like news," DeAndre said with excitement. Changing his voice to sound official and holding an imaginary microphone in one hand, he said to the others, "Today's weather. Today the weather is cancelled and Yu-Gi-Oh cards are now prevailing." This made Tony laugh, so DeAndre continued in a tone as manly as his unpredictable vocal chords could

muster, “Let’s begin with Obelisk the Tormentor. Now we have Obelisk the Tormentor, who can inflict 4,000 life points direct damage . . .” So it was decided that the movie would take the form of a television news show.

As the boys worked to decide who would talk about the chosen themes, DeAndre assessed each individual’s knowledge on the particular topics. “What do you know about rituals?” he asked Fransisco, sizing him up for the job. When Fransisco’s answer was not up to par, DeAndre encouraged him by telling him what he could add to his explanation: “Repeat after me: Fusion monsters are two or more fusion materials combined to form a new monster.” Fransisco tried, but each time he attempted to repeat DeAndre’s words he got more and more tongue-tied. Even with encouragement Fransisco was nervous about remembering all of the information, so DeAndre provided him with a scaffold by writing up an enlarged cue card for him to read during the filming.

When all of the reporting parts had been assigned, the only thing left to plan was who would be in the “demonstration duel.” This was to be the climax of their movie, where all of the preceding bits of information would culminate in the modeling of an actual duel. Tony asked, “Who’s going to be in the demonstration duel?” Without waiting for an answer, he looked at DeAndre and said, “It’s your time to shine.” DeAndre nodded; the unselfish group leader accepted the honor to “shine” as a player in the most important scene of the movie.

By Session 15 the plans were complete and most of the scenes were shot. While I sat with Bernice and Thalía discussing their movie, the boys went into a room

across the hall to work independently finishing up the filming and editing of the movie they called *Yu-Gi-Oh News Day*. By this time I already had been impressed by their hard work and dedication and had no fears about allowing them to work without adult supervision. Nothing could distract them from their goal of finishing this movie.

Disturbing News

DeAndre is extraordinary because he is creative, articulate, and a brilliant critical thinker; has a profound depth of knowledge about Yu-Gi-Oh; and has a wonderful sense of humor. He demonstrated all of this in his handling of the Yu-Gi-Oh moviemaking collaboration. Up until this point I intentionally have left out some important information about DeAndre. He is labeled in school as an emotionally disturbed child and receives instruction in a self-contained special education classroom. This means he is with a small group of other children, mostly boys, for all of his academic classes and is only allowed to mix with the general population at Live Oak for PE and Health classes. During the year of this study he had shown some improvement in his behavior and was granted the privilege of walking to lunch without the accompaniment of a teacher, something the regular students at Live Oak take for granted. Apparently he did such a good job at this he was allowed at times to serve as a chaperone for another boy in his class who was still on "phase one," meaning he could not go to lunch on his own.

It was third grade when a pudgy little DeAndre was deemed to be emotionally disturbed and was sentenced to years of special education. Although he was not in my

class at the time, I remember him well, arriving each day to the room next to mine with a seemingly unkempt afro and a permanent scowl. Even then he did not struggle academically, but his constant run-ins with the teacher and his difficulty getting along with peers red-flagged him as a problem child. About midway through a rough year for DeAndre, he made a grave error. While waiting in line for music class he had a verbal altercation with a girl who had been antagonizing him all year. Although I personally do not believe he fully understood the severity of his own words, he was reported as having threatened to rape this little girl. The teacher immediately started the process of referring him for special education. After an extended stay at an alternative school, he began his career in self-contained special education.

Since that time he has been in special education classes and has continued to have disciplinary problems at school. I can cast no stones and certainly am not free of blame in this story. DeAndre was assigned to my class in fifth grade, although it was little more than a technicality. During the year I saw little of him. He arrived each day a few minutes before lunch and specials so he could line up and walk down the hall with the rest of the class; other than that he spent his time out in a portable classroom with the other special education students. On the last day of school the children in my class were getting ready for their graduation ceremony, as was the custom for fifth graders. DeAndre, being a fifth grader in my class, was in the room. When I heard a scream from the girls' bathroom and shouts of accusation that he had opened the door on some girls who were changing, I did not take time to get his side of the story. Instead, I immediately I found him guilty and began to verbally reprimand him, at

which he bolted from the room. I followed him out to the hall and reached him, like a harmonic convergence, at precisely the same time as his mother (who was coming for graduation) and the principal (who happened to be walking down the hall). Surrounded by three adults and again hearing my version of what had just transpired must have felt like a huge injustice, so he looked up at me and shouted on the top of his lungs, "I hate you, you fucking liar!" Those words and the tone of his voice have been etched permanently in my mind. It was then that I realized that I was a part of the problem. This problem included school that was a hostile environment for DeAndre, framed him as a "bad kid," and seemed to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

These problems followed him to middle school. Although he is intellectually and socially quite capable, as was evidenced by his creativity and his demonstration of leadership abilities in the Yu-Gi-Oh movie project, his difficulties seem to have escalated with age. I mentioned that DeAndre's excitement about the Yu-Gi-Oh project inspired him to arrive early almost every week. In fact, there was only one week that he was not the first to arrive. In Session 12 the school day ended and my participants filed into our meeting room to resume work on their movie projects, as was the routine by then. However, on this day DeAndre uncharacteristically was not there. I asked Tony of his whereabouts; they are best friends and live on the same street. I was surprised to hear Tony say that he had no idea and had not seen DeAndre for a few days.

About a half hour into our session the door opened and DeAndre came in, looking grim. When I asked where he had been, he said, "Locked up." It was apparent that he did not want to talk about it, but he told me later that he had been arrested for making a "terroristic threat." This is a legal term meaning he had threatened to kill another boy. Although I realize that DeAndre has a temper at times, I have a hard time seeing him as a "thug." However, as time goes by he seems to be seeing himself that way. For example, in Session 2 when we discussed the possibility of making movies about their lives, DeAndre was one of the only people who expressed an interest in this. He said, "My Ghetto Life, about my screwed-up life. I would do one about me and say, examples you should not follow."

"Why do you say that?" I asked.

He simply replied, "I'm on probation, that's something bad. Right?" It was as if he was searching for a way to define himself, and this was the way that seemed most accessible to him. In Session 5, when we discussed race and ethnicity I asked the group how they self-identify. He replied, "I identify as beating people up and taking their money." The thought of DeAndre beating someone up and taking their money would be comical if it were not so tragic. It is comical because he could almost be considered a geek, or a nerd, the way he is so into fantasy and Yu-Gi-Oh cards. If he had been born into another circumstance (like White and middle-class), that is exactly what he would be. But he is African American, poor, and lives in a racist society. It is a tragedy to see him taking on an identity of "thug" because he sees no other options left to him.

When DeAndre has a Yu-Gi-Oh deck in his hands he is powerful and he is free. It is perhaps the only time when his true talents are seen. This card game is a personal outlet in DeAndre's life, which is rapidly becoming a "thug's life." In school he is labeled as emotionally disturbed and is confined to a small special education classroom for most of the day. He does not have access to other forms of outlets described in this chapter. It is hugely ironic that the Powerpoint he made to help his fellow moviemakers was done during school. Since DeAndre is in special education he is exempt from taking the TAKS test (the statewide assessment). To fill time, to keep him quiet and occupied, while the other students were testing, his teacher allowed him to play on the computer. The elaborate and beautifully organized project was entirely self-initiated and showed his tremendous ability in literacy and creativity. The work he did for this Powerpoint is far more complex than what was being asked on the minimum competency exam he was not allowed to take.

School may be mismatched from the lives of the majority of my participants, but for none does it take on such a drastic poorness of fit. The curriculum that DeAndre experiences in school is not complex enough to keep him interested and motivated. Nothing that happens in his classes can match the purposeful integration of math skills, critical thinking, and quick decision making required to reach the level of Yu-Gi-Oh he has attained. For DeAndre no outlets are available at school; he does not get to be in drama club or band. Yu-Gi-Oh is his outlet, but it does not carry with it the connectedness the others get from extracurricular activities or church.

School is not meeting his needs, and the only path he sees is the "thug's life." If DeAndre were White and lived on the west side of town, it might be said that he has a bad temper, but he would likely be considered gifted and would not have been placed in special education. This is not the right place for someone as bright as he, but there is no one to fight to advocate for him. His troubles have escalated, and he is now a 14-year-old with a probation officer.

Who really has an emotional disorder? Is it DeAndre, who clearly showed interpersonal skills, amazing creativity, and intellectual critical thinking (in math, language, and organization) when leading his group in their movie project? I say it is curriculum that has the disorder. If school could offer him opportunities to do the types of things that Yu-Gi-Oh allows him to do, like critical thinking and showmanship, then he would, to paraphrase Tony's words, "have his time to shine."

Conclusion

School is not meeting the needs of the participants of my study. At school they report experiencing boredom, and they fail to see the connection between what they are asked to do and their lives. These young people seek outlets in a variety of places in order to feel a sense of engagement and passion.

In this chapter I have outlined the areas where my participants have found engagement and passion. At times these outlets are based in school. Such is the case with electives and extracurricular activities. Unfortunately, these are not areas that are considered of great importance by policymakers. The excitement felt by students

towards their experiences in electives, like the example of the Latin American Studies class for Thalía and Bernice, is not reported in academic core classes that even the participants view as more important for their academic success. Socializing is another appealing outlet that is based in school; however, the structure of schooling relegates this activity to times outside of the classroom. When students act on their desire to socialize in the classroom, it is considered misbehavior by teachers and takes on the form of resistance to the teacher-dominated school experiences of my participants.

Other outlets identified by my participants can be found in their lives outside of school. These include experiences with family, church, hanging out in the neighborhood, and personal interests like Yu-Gi-Oh cards. The rich experiences my participants take from each of these out-of-school outlets contribute to the quality of their lives and their personal and intellectual development. Students use many skills daily in authentic situations in their lives outside of school; these need to be embraced by teachers and used to "hook" children into school learning. Lip service is often paid to the importance of knowing what children bring to school. Until there is a concerted effort to open up spaces in the curriculum for such knowledge to be considered assets that can bridge the home–school experiences of young people, school will be mismatched to the lives of many of the students.

Researchers and schools need to look at these outlets to see what they have to offer in terms of school experiences. If schools were structured differently, we would see what children are truly capable of doing. If students like DeAndre could find the complexity they are looking for in the curriculum, perhaps they would not need

probation officers at the age of 14. Schools could be an incredible and awesome place for kids if we could find the key to unlock the passion in individual students. It seems that the key is right in front of our noses: It is in the students' lives, but we must allow the students to show it to us when they are in the school building.

Chapter 8

Challenges Faced in Students' Voices Research

The scene opens with a close-up shot of the face of a man talking. He has a serious expression and barely pauses to catch his breath between the streams of words flowing from his mouth. As the camera slowly pans out a chalkboard is revealed behind him, showing notes he has written that fill the entire board, identifying him as a classroom teacher. The angle continues to widen as if moving further away towards the back of the classroom. As this happens a room of young teenage students enters into view, at desks in rows that face the front. Once the camera has moved far enough back to show the entire classroom scene, the camera focus shifts, blurring the teacher, whose voice also fades to a constant hum in the background. The students in the class are now the primary focus. With this new perspective a teenage voice-over states, "This is a movie made by eighth-grade students about our experiences at school. Most movies about school are made by adults; now it is our turn to tell it like it really is." Although the students initially appeared to be listening to the teacher's lecture, the now sharper image of them at their desks uncovers a different story.

Before I continue with the description of this student-made movie I need to confess that as the supposed primary investigator for this research project it is my job to write about the mockumentary *Kids Speak Back*. However, I am slightly uneasy with the task. I am both apprehensive and delighted to tell about it, because the

purpose behind the pseudo-documentary film was to highlight students' words and perspectives in the face of a society where adults regularly speak for and about school children, often in a less than sympathetic light. I am an adult teacher/researcher, so technically I am part of the problem as far as this movie is concerned. The fact that I am distorting their story by writing about it from my comfortable position behind a desk in an office at a university may be one more example of adult domination in the lives of these school children. This is problematic, and although I am apprehensive I have no choice but to write about the story brought forth by my participants. After all, this is part of the data.

On the other hand, it was the intention of my research to foreground my participants' words, and for this reason I am delighted at their attempts at self-determination. Their story, the story of this movie, should be included in the write-up of my dissertation. Somehow I need to find a way to discuss the cleverness of my participants, who commandeered my project and made it their own by creating a film that playfully caricatures the behaviors of children (played by themselves), teachers (played by a real teacher), and even adult researchers (played by me). I am not sure it is possible for me to step out of my closeness to the project, my adultness, or my Whiteness, in order to explain this situation in a nonbiased way. Realizing that it is less than perfect, I will attempt to write about their film in a straightforward style.

Ines, a tall girl with straight black hair that falls halfway across her face, is hunched over her notebook in the back of the room. On the page in front of her she repeatedly traces over the same sentence written in black ink. With each pass of her

pen the words grow bolder and stand out in contrast to the empty white space of the page around them. Across her page is written, "I love Johnny Depp." As far as the teacher can tell, she is busily taking notes and therefore left alone to concentrate on her graphic mantra.

Two girls seated close to Ines are whispering back and forth. Jaqueline and Sonia sit partially sideways in their chairs with one eye constantly on the teacher. They have spent the last 3 years of middle school perfecting the positioning so as to feign attention while chatting about their personal lives. Like escaping prisoners who pause in shadows waiting for the beams of the search lights to pass before making brief sprints towards freedom, the two girls quietly watch for the gaze of the teacher to pass before letting loose a flurry of gossip. And so goes their conversation with the stop-start cadence of rapid verbiage and poised silences. At times there may be a close call, like when the teacher unpredictably changed the routine of his eye sweeps and looked directly at them. The girls, who are seasoned and also prepared, shoot up their hands to ask general questions, thus proving they have been listening. This is usually enough to suffice; the teacher takes the bait and embarks on a long-winded explanation, happy to know that someone besides him is interested in the content of the lecture. Besides successfully escaping punishment and continuing their conversation, the girls get the added satisfaction of peer approval. Covert smiles spread across the faces of the youngsters, all of whom seem to be aware that the age-old, but never out of fashion, ploy of redirecting the teacher has just transpired.

Just in front of Jaqueline and Sonia are Bernice, Thalía, and Griselda. The 3 face forward and all sit supporting their chins in their hands. They have bored expressions on their faces, but out of respect try to attend to the teacher's lecture. They rarely talk to each other in class and at times when the chatty girls behind them get a little too loud Thalía will turn and usher a, "Shhh" in their direction. It is not that Thalía is eager to hear the teacher, but she does not want to see her friends get punished.

In the front of the room is a group of four boys. They do not appear to be listening to the lecture nor do they attempt to disguise their disinterest, as do their female counterparts. Fransisco, with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled tightly over his ears, rests his head on the table and appears to be sleeping. At seemingly random times he pops upright in his chair and in a loud voice proclaims, "I'm bored" before allowing his head to plop back down on the table with a thud. Next to Fransisco is Joe, who looks slightly older than the others because of his height and a fresh patch of facial hair shading his upper lip. He sits low in his chair with headphones over his ears. His eyes are directed downward under his table where he fingers through a small case of compact disks. The other two boys, DeAndre and Tony, each have a stack of cards in front of them. Engrossed in some form of commerce they pull cards from their own decks and after a few whispers and nods either exchange the cards or replace them back to their pile. What seems to unite this motley group is the fact that none of them are paying attention to the lecture.

There is one more student in the room. Her straight blond hair is pulled back into a ponytail, and her pink sweater practically matches her cheeks. Beth sits off to one side, and though her expression shows boredom she takes copious notes in a spiral-bound notepad. When the teacher asks a question she waits long enough to make sure no one else will volunteer to answer. Perhaps she is being conscientious and does not want to dominate, or maybe she does not want to be singled out by her peers as a "teacher's pet." Finally, at the point where the teacher begins to get frustrated by the awkward silence, Beth raises her hand and tells the teacher what he wants to hear. She sympathizes with the frustrations of the teacher; she too feels frustrated in this class and wishes the other students would take it more seriously so they all could move at a faster pace and have more challenging work. She often stays after class to talk with the teacher about the topic he has covered and frequently asks for extra assignments.

In the back corner of the classroom is another adult male. His wrinkled khaki pants and button-down shirt are clean but mark him clearly as an outsider, not kempt enough to be a teacher and not young or stylish enough to be a middle school student. Jesse is a university student conducting research for a doctorate degree in curriculum. From his seat in the back he scans across the room and then frantically scribbles notes on a yellow legal pad. He tries not to make eye contact with anyone and never utters a word, attempting to blend into the woodwork. This must seem odd to the teacher and the students, for whom he is conspicuously present at all times. When the teacher or a student directs an aside to him and blows his imaginary

"cover," he waves his arms around, signaling for them to stop, or he just sinks down into his chair trying to be invisible.

After the initial classroom scene the movie cuts to interviews with the various students from the class. They speak directly to the camera about the scene that just transpired. Apart from Beth, who talks about enjoying the format and content of the class, the students agree that the class, like most of their school experiences, is boring because the teacher talks too much. In the interviews the boys point out that the content of the class is not related to their interests. Thalía, Bernice, and Griselda highlight the lack of engagement they feel and wish they could do more active and hands-on activities, especially ones that have authentic purposes. Sonia, Ines, and Jaqueline talk about strategies for socializing in class and avoiding detection from the teacher.

Next the students interview the teacher of the class. They ask him why he lectures so much and what he thinks of the class. Although the teacher appears slightly uncomfortable discussing curricular issues with his students, he is a good sport and responds seriously to the inquiries of the young people. He tells them about a dense curriculum based on state objectives and the pressures of covering all this information before the statewide standardized tests. He says he would like to have them do more hands-on small group activities, but there is not time considering how much they must cover in the semester. In addition, he remarks that the behaviors of the students have led him to conclude that they are not capable of working together in small groups. It seems that he is aware of the side conversations, doodling, and

daydreaming that go on, even though he does not always stop class to address them. This brings a self-conscious giggle from the student-interviewers. In a didactic tone he continues by telling the interviewers about the atmosphere when he was in school. According to this 30-something individual, in his day children were not asked what they wanted to do; they just listened and did what they were told. He feels that today it is different because negative influences of media like MTV and videogames have shortened the attention spans of young people and taught them that it is acceptable to be disrespectful towards adults.

Even the so-called researcher does not escape the gaze of this documentary. The students put their camera on him and ask why he is in their room observing their class and what he is going to write in his paper about the observations he has made. He awkwardly fumbles with words, unaccustomed to being called to task by the participants of his research. It seems he is overly careful selecting words, as if he has something to hide. He eventually strings together some thoughts about being interested in how children learn and wanting to know about what students think about their experiences at school in the hopes that it could help him understand how to make school a more engaging and better place for everyone.

The students have the last word in the video. In the final scene they address the camera as a group. They take turns stating their thoughts about what could make school a more engaging place for all children. Their list includes hands-on activities, cooperative small group work, purposeful projects based on students' interests, and

teachers who are knowledgeable about the cultures of their students and gear learning to be culturally relevant.

The movie described in the preceding story never actually happened. It is an imaginary scenario that I wrote to demonstrate what I initially hoped would occur in my dissertation research. I dreamed of a project that not only would foreground my participants' voices but also would empower them to become critical-minded researchers, skeptical of anyone (including me) who might purport to speak for or about them. I chose to begin this reflexive chapter with a fictional account of my desires for the project to highlight the irony and the danger of attempting to represent others' perspectives. This is especially problematic in cases such as mine where an adult, White man, no matter how gently, attempts to represent voices of children of color. Such a case adds the colonial dimension of someone from a privileged societal position dominating a marginalized group of people. It is obvious to most that I have overstepped my bounds when I consciously wrote a fictional account of my participants' words, and it should seem like throwing salt in a wound that I did it in a way that purported to be an empowering experience for the students who were demonstrating agency. What I believe is less apparent, and I hope to bring to the forefront in this chapter, is that there is no way to avoid this problem, even when I try to write about their views about schooling based on the real movies they made and the actual discussions we had together.

Although the movie I have just described is fictitious, it easily could have happened had I chosen to approach my research project in a more top–down fashion.

This point may seem ironic, since the story depicted students who were apparently acting as researchers while expressing agency and self-determination in the face of teacher-dominated school experiences. However, it likely would have happened because my participants are children and are used to following the lead of teachers. I was once their teacher, and although I stepped into my role with them in this project as self-declared coresearcher, they were often more than willing to follow my direction. I would also like to think, having known me for a number of years, that these students trusted me enough to follow my lead. Should I have suggested it, I am fairly certain that my participants would have gladly followed my lead and made the movie I described in the beginning of this chapter. Had I done that I would not be reporting to you about my breach of ethics in fabricating data, instead I would "simply" write about their movie. If that had been the case, I must ask, would the result be an example of their voices or mine? This may be an extreme example; however, I believe that all teaching and research situations have an element of domination that cannot be avoided but should not be swept under the carpet.

I feel that I lost something when I consciously decided not to take over their project and direct them to create an exposé movie that purported to be in students' voices and looked critically at school via a pseudo-documentary that blurred the lines between reality and fiction. I have spent time mourning the loss of what I perceived as my clever idea to empower students by foregrounding their voices and the loss of the flashy movie that I would have had to show for my trouble.

I made a conscious sacrifice; I tried to let go of some control—of my tendency as a White man, as an adult, and as a teacher to know what is best and to dominate classroom experiences—in order to make way for my participants to explore their own ideas. I cannot say that the students gained more from the experience since I did not direct them with such a heavy hand. Perhaps through the experience I am the one who benefited the most by learning to hold my tongue and thus learning humility. Conversely, I certainly cannot say that I left no mark on the products of their movies as if I did not influence their efforts. To say that would be a smokescreen, and I imagine it would not even fool the most sympathetic readers of this project.

I started this chapter with a fabrication of my participants' work to foreground their own voices. I used my imagination to synthesize some of the issues they brought forth in the course of this study and some of my initial hopes about the nature of the project. I realize that this is extremely manipulative on my part, but so is attempting to represent students' "authentic" voices. There is a degree of truth in my fictional account, just as there is a degree of fiction in my accounts of the participants' actual voices. In the process of my research experience I learned that there is more to a story than what meets the eye, and something that purports to be students' voices may have a great deal of subtext that often goes unmentioned. This subtext is the focus of this chapter, and I hope it will add to the complexity and verisimilitude of my work as a whole.

The purpose of my research was to foreground middle school students' voices about their schooling. It would be sneaky and misleading if I did not also include an

explanation about the process of my research and the representation I have spun. In this chapter I will attempt to remove some of the outer layers of the research to expose the beams that undergird the construction of my project. This chapter is an attempt to reflect on the process and to highlight some of the tensions and contradictions I faced and struggled with as I navigated the tricky waters of student-centered curriculum and a framework based on allowing students' voices to be heard. Turning the lens back on the process to discuss some of the pitfalls of my research experience will never make it fully transparent; however, I hope to add a layer of complexity, and therefore honesty, to my representations and findings.

Methodological Concerns

When conceptualizing the methodology for this study a primary objective was how to foreground my participants' voices but still make my authorial presence known. It was important to avoid purporting to "give voice" to students from dominated groups as if I were somehow neutral and not a part of the process, and equally important not to appear to speak for marginalized students. At best it is an overly romantic notion to think I could relay participants' voices without influencing the outcome. Worse yet, to make such a claim would be hugely arrogant and colonial, especially given my position as a White researcher working with students of color. On the other hand it would also be problematic if I had too strong of a presence in the representations. I did not want to create a self-indulgent or narcissistic project that exploited the participants in order for me to construct an autobiographical hero's

journey that would frame myself as a savior who benevolently empowered my participants.

I tried to address my concerns in the methodological design in hopes of building structures that would silence myself while providing avenues for students' voices to be heard. These structures included a collaborative research style, a critical constructivist framework, and the use of video data. This section looks at some of the pitfalls of these methodological issues as they surfaced in my research process.

Collaborative Research Issues

An important aspect of using a students' voices framework for me was to have student participants who were coresearchers in the investigation. It was my intention to provide the materials and some guidance in the research process in order to facilitate my participants' abilities to become social science researchers investigating and reporting on their own school experiences. The students are the experts on their own lives, and it seemed logical that they would be the best chroniclers of their experiences with schooling. In addition, the perspectives of students, those most directly affected by curriculum, are seldom offered.

In my research proposal I situated my participants as coresearchers who would observe and analyze their school experiences. They were to be responsible for generating themes and collecting data to support their assertions about school. In theory it seemed like a fine way to construct a more egalitarian research process that would de-center myself as the principal investigator.

Based on my experience, my goal of being a coresearcher with my participants might have been slightly romantic. My participants did not share my desire to pursue educational research. That was my goal, and I neglected to consult with them when dreaming up the idea for the study. This was an oversight on my part when I embarked on the initial planning of the project. In my desire to create an egalitarian collaborative approach, I neglected to include my participants in the conceptualization of the project (Goldstein, 2000).

In the fall I spent time in the school cafeteria talking to my former students about the after-school program, drumming up interest in hopes of recruiting them as participants. Sonia was one of the first students I spoke with about the plan. I knew she was bright, enthusiastic, and socially well connected. Talking to her first was strategic; I knew if I got her on board, she would help convince others to join. On the day I approached her she sat at a table with some friends. Between bites of tater-tots the girls laughed and shrieked back and forth catching up on the latest school gossip.

"Sonia can I talk to you for a minute?" I interrupted, taking the empty seat next to her.

"Hi, Mr. Gainer. What are you doing here?" Sonia looked slightly surprised to see me in this context. Her friends continued with their animated conversation as Sonia and I talked.

"I was wondering if I could ask your help in a project I am doing for my dissertation. I need to do research about education and I want to get a group of kids from our old class and have you all be researchers and make movies about your

experiences at school. My research will be about the process of you guys making the movies. What do you think?"

"Oh, I get it. You want us to do your work for you," she quickly retorted with smiling eyes. Her statement, said with humor, carried with it a deeper significance. The significance is not so much that I was trying to get out of doing work, but that she did not buy the idea that we would really be coresearchers. She had a good point; after all, I am the one who stood to benefit from the work, and in the end the project was for my dissertation.

When I approached Joe that same lunch period his reaction shed light on our unequal attachment to the project. Similar to the interaction I had with Sonia, I sat down next to Joe, who was busily joking around with a group of friends.

"Hi, Joe, I wanted to ask your help with a project I am working on for my degree at the university," I started, preparing to go into the details of the plan.

"Sure, I'll do anything—as long as it's legal," was his response before I could even tell what I was asking of him. Like Sonia, Joe used humor to communicate that he would be willing to help. The fact that he was so quick to agree without even hearing the idea further demonstrates who was most invested in the idea of conducting research.

I am not trying to say that my participants never became interested in their projects; they did once we began the after-school sessions and they started their small group movies. However, their attitude towards the research was more that of helping me with some big homework assignment and not necessarily a drive to help create

new knowledge. Throughout the course of our time together my participants contributed a great deal to the process of data collection, but there was never a feeling that we were equals or even that they were conducting academic research. Rather than seeing themselves as critical researchers struggling to reform education, my participants viewed themselves as children, and their primary interest was to have fun. In the end it was my dissertation project, and my participants seemed to see their role as one of having fun while helping me with my big "homework" assignment.

Critical Constructivist Framework

As a White-male-adult-teacher-researcher working with students of color it was very important to design a research methodology to help me keep my privileged entitlement in check. It was easy for me to fall into the pattern of feeling that I knew what was best for the project or that I knew more than my participants. It felt very natural for me at every step of the project to want to take over and begin to direct the students. Though I was aware that my desire to dominate, based on my privileged social position, would defeat the purpose of my research, I often struggled to hold my tongue and allow the participants to explore their own interests.

In theory, critical constructivism provided a good framework for me to step back and allow my participants to exercise self-determination. The main tenets of this framework are that participants should be involved in the social construction of knowledge by generating themes and collecting and analyzing data. My role as a researcher would be to facilitate the process and provide gentle nudges to guide the

participants towards critical perspectives about their experiences (Lincoln, 1995). The autonomy called for in critical constructivism is aligned with learning theory and the politics of soliciting students' voices (Lincoln). A comprehensive review of this framework is beyond the scope of this section, but is discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

Middle school is often characterized by top–down, teacher-centered instruction, as Bernice, Thalía, and Griselda pointed out in their movie, *A Day at School*. Research corroborates the assertions of these girls and shows that even though many teachers claim to have constructivist views about learning, this often does not translate into constructivist teaching practices (Nieto, 2000; Pitton, 2001). I found that I fell into this trap myself as a teacher-researcher. A clear example of this occurred in Session 4. When I approached the topic of teaching my participants how to use the equipment for filming and editing, I fell back into the comfort of teacher-directed instruction.

In Session 4 I introduced the students to the editing software on the computer. Since the majority of the participants had never worked with iMovie software, I started with a mini-lecture to explain how to use it. I presented a visual I had made that showed an enlarged computer screen with all of the features they would need to use in the program. In less than 5 minutes of my presentation I lost the attention of the participants. The boys put on headphones and listened to music, and the girls appeared to be daydreaming. Figure 2 shows Ines and Thalía apparently spacing out as I talked about the iMovie program. Thalía's head rests in her hands and her eyes

are closed; Ines's eyes are glazed over as if she is daydreaming. The picture tells the story of their disengagement better than words.

Less than 10 minutes later the students were working in groups editing in the iMovie program. They were working on footage they took for a scavenger hunt activity. Figure 3 shows Thalía, Ines, and Jaqueline actively splitting clips on the laptop. The expressions on their faces show concentration and engagement. Not only are they engaged, they also are closely collaborating. The 3 girls are huddled together shoulder-to-shoulder staring intently at their work. As evidenced in the picture, their hands are resting on top of each other's, all operating the computer together. This interactive style of collaboration was very much illustrative of the way all of the participants worked when they edited their work in small groups. Just before this shot was taken the girls asked me how to split a clip. This was something I had explained in my presentation around the time the picture in Figure 2 was taken. In a matter of seconds I was able to guide them through the process as they actually did it on their computer with their own video footage. The information they did not retain from my lecture was easily assimilated and understood when they were engaged in an authentic experience that they found purposeful and interesting.

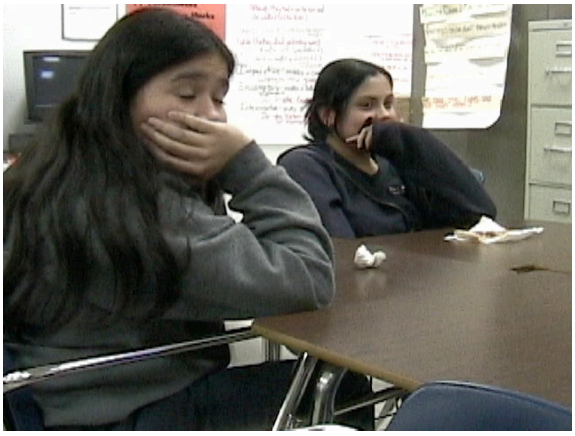

Figure 2. Passively listening to editing lecture.

Figure 3. Actively engaged in editing.

It was not only in technical issues where I found it challenging to stick to constructivist ideals. Even my goal of soliciting students' perspectives on schooling initially proved to be more focused on my own agenda of being critical and producing critical work than on actually listening to the voices of my participants. This became

clear to me in our first session together. Our interaction on this day illustrated how my initial plan clearly highlighted my own interests and not those of my participants.

On January 7, 2004, I felt a nervous pit in my stomach the size of a basketball. It was the day I was to begin my after-school sessions with my participants. Twelve students had agreed to be a part of my study, and I wondered if they would actually show up for the sessions. On this day I knew I had to deliver something interesting in order to capture their attention and keep them coming back. I had been studying the context of the school for the past year and was excited to finally start the phase of my research where I actually worked with participants to solicit their views on schooling. I imagined a critical project that could even have empowering or transformative potential for my participants. I had huge expectations and had no doubt that my participants, my former students, would be just as excited as I.

I spent days planning out exactly what we would do for every minute of our hour and a half together. The trash bin at my house was filled to the brim with crumpled papers that contained attempts at lesson plans that did not make the final cut. I rewrote my plans many times, changing minute details each time, trying to hone the plans to perfection. The final draft of my lesson plan for Session 1 consisted of five pages of detailed notes in outline form.

When the school bell rang at 3:30 p.m. I anxiously stood outside the door of our borrowed classroom with a box of warm pizza in one hand and a suitcase full of video equipment in the other. Tony and his brother Fransisco were the first to arrive,

entering the room together they scanned the scene as if looking for a sign that it would be worth staying.

"Come in and have a seat," I said smiling nervously.

"What kind of pizza is that?" queried Fransisco.

"Pepperoni," I said and held my breath hoping it was the right answer.

"Yes!" Tony exclaimed, with clinched fists shooting up into the air. The two boys found seats at the table with the pizza.

Minutes later Griselda and Beth came in separately, each toting heavy backpacks. They sat down at separate locations and quietly waited for my lead. Then Thalía appeared with a smile on her face and found a seat next to her old friend Griselda.

"We'll wait to see if the others come," I said feeling somewhat relieved to have at least 5 participants. Five minutes had ticked by since the bell marking the end of the school day and the start of my dissertation research. These few minutes felt like an eternity as I waited and wondered about the unknown course the future held for me and my project.

Next Jaqueline walked through the door, dragging a resistant Ines by the arm. Both girls had tentative expressions and shuffled in with hunched shoulders as if to communicate they really did not want to be here. Ines handed me a crumpled piece of paper, her signed permission slip, and the two girls found an empty cluster of desks and took a seat. At 3:40 p.m. Joe bopped in with headphones over his ears. "Yo, Mr., what's up?" he yelled over the music that only he could hear.

All of the participants were in the room except the 3 who had already told me they would not be able to make it to the first session because they had previous commitments. They sat looking at me waiting for my directions. As I looked out over the group I was surprised to see just how spread out 9 students could make themselves in such a small room. They took seats in small groups as far from each other as physically possible.

"Why don't you all get a piece of pizza and then move a little bit closer so you're not so spread out all over the room." These were my first words to the group, and they were not from my carefully planned script.

"Ugh," was the collective response to my request. Chair bottoms screeched across the linoleum floors as the young teens begrudgingly complied and inched slightly closer to me and to each other. Tony, Fransisco, and DeAndre sat together at a cluster of desks directly in front of me. Ines, Jaqueline, Thalía, and Griselda sat together at another table. Both Beth and Joe chose to sit alone; they moved slightly closer but stayed in the back separate from the groups. I would soon find out that the physical distance that separated the small groups of students was nothing compared to the gulf that separated all of them from me in terms of expectations for this project. My five-page outline for the day would do little to bridge the gap.

"What you will be doing in this after-school club is make movies to tell what school is really like and how it could be made better," I began reading from my notes. I felt sure that they would let go of the teenage act and bubble with excitement when I explained what was in store for them. "My research is going to be about the process

of you all making the movies. It will be kind of like that movie about the making of *Apocalypse Now*. Did any of you see that one?" I looked out at 9 faces staring blankly at me. Apparently no one had seen it.

Still intent on pitching the idea, I went into some details for our project together. "We are going to watch some movies made about students and schools. Adults make these movies about kids. After we watch we will talk about the movies and you guys can tell what it is really like. Also, we will learn about video equipment and do activities to help you get familiar with it. Then you are going to make your own movie about a topic that you choose based on your experiences at school. It could be fiction or documentary, it could be in English or Spanish, it will be up to you. You are the experts! Adults are always trying to make schools better for kids but no one ever asks the students how school could be better. This is a chance for you to tell it like it really is."

When I looked up from my paper I could see that they were not responding the way I planned. The entire group had glazed expressions on their faces. The few eyes that were still pointing in my direction looked like zombies' with black-and-white spirals beaming out into space. Heads were propped up resting in hands with bodies slumped over the small school desks. I feared I was losing them, but I was still on the first page of my outline and had a lot more information to cover before we could get to the really fun stuff.

I could not bear to abandon my script, so I tried speaking faster. "If you get into this project and do a good movie, lots of people would be interested in seeing it.

Classes of university students would want to see it. There are local film festivals for youth. You could also share it with classes here at Live Oak. So start thinking about ideas now. It is important for you to begin looking around while you are at school. Think about what you would like to focus on. Try to make the familiar strange. Think about how you would describe school to someone who knows nothing about it. Like if someone just came here from another planet, what would they need to know about school?" I tried to pack everything I knew about ethnography into my monologue and then cram it down their throats. As I droned on and on I was cognizant of the fact that things were not going well. It seemed that the children were not necessarily interested in making films about school experiences, and I was unprepared for this reaction. I continued talking, hoping to win them over. I just could not get myself to abandon my plan because I felt it was vital for them to understand my intentions before diving into the hands-on experiences of making movies.

Eventually the students' silence gave way to resistance. After 30 minutes of my monologue they woke from their zombie-like states and took matters into their own hands. If I was not going to make this interesting, they would find other ways to pass the time. Their "off-task" behavior forced me to acknowledge their presence in the room.

"DeAndre, turn off your music," I interrupted my talk to scold DeAndre. I had noticed that he had been tinkering with a compact disk player for the last few minutes.

"Oh maaan," was his response. It stung because I had not planned on having to be a disciplinarian in an after-school club that was supposed to be fun.

Tony pulled a toy plastic soldier from his pocket and was playing with it on the table. This got Francisco's attention; until then he had the hood of his sweatshirt pulled loosely over his head, was sprawled out on the table, and looked to be sleeping. Eyeing the soldier he lifted his head, smiled, and reached for the toy.

"Put that toy away or I'm going to take it from you." As much as I did not want to admit it, I still had a lot of the old teacher left in me. I seemed to slip naturally into the standard reaction of threats of punishment.

These 3 were not the only participants who did not seem engaged listening to my introductory words. At this point, about 40 minutes into our first session, Joe was out of his chair and was aimlessly walking around the room. He seemed to be looking for something to better occupy his time. The girls were less active in their resistance but communicated their boredom just as effectively. They slouched in their chairs and stared off into space. Occasionally one would whisper something across the table, and they all would giggle quietly.

I was completely shocked to be getting this type of resistance on the first day of our sessions. It seemed that my ship was sinking; my "revolutionary" project with empowered student researchers looked good on paper but did not seem so liberatory when the participants were sitting in front of me obviously less than enthusiastic about the plan.

It is ironic that a project that purported to be about foregrounding students' voices about schooling should begin with a teacher monologue to a group of silent students. This interaction was not unusual, however, but representative of the bulk of teacher–student interactions in American schooling. Students are expected to "learn what is decided, designed, and executed by others" (Nieto, 1994, p. 105). With the good intentions of soliciting students' perspectives, I inadvertently created a situation similar to what Freire (1970) condemned as the banking concept of education for powerlessness: "The teacher chooses the program content, and the students [who were not consulted] adapt to it" (p. 73). This was very problematic, especially since I was attempting to set up a research situation where students took the lead in the direction of the investigation.

Unintentionally, I was reproducing teacher–student roles that are typical in middle school classrooms (Pitton, 2001). The active resistance by the boys and the passive resistance of the girls are common student reactions to top–down instruction (Giroux, 1983; Willis, 1977). The researcher in me was floating above the room looking down at the scene and criticizing the teacher who was rambling on and on, demanding students to be passive receptacles. The teacher in me just could not stop talking; there was too much at stake. I believed they needed to understand what this project was all about and lecture surfaced as the most efficient manner to deliver the information. It seems I was the one who forgot what this project was all about.

Finally, with 30 minutes left in the first session I decided it would be a good idea to get into an activity. I had planned to introduce them to the equipment by

making a short movie as a group. My plan consisted of three parts, (a) a very simple scenario, (b) picking actors and camera people, and then (c) filming. This would show them how easy it was to use the equipment and would get their creative juices flowing. Instead of building interest, the activity left me feeling as if I fell flat on my face.

"Ok, I want you to see how easy it is to make a movie with this equipment." I held up a digital video camera and a laptop computer. "We have to make up a simple scenario quickly because we are running out of time. Who can think of something?"

You could have heard a pin drop in the still air of the room. There was an awkward silence because nobody wanted to take the risk of saying something and be laughed at by the others.

"Bullying," shouted out Tony in a tongue-and-cheek tone. Everyone laughed at his response that mocked the teacher-friendly theme familiar in so many made-for-TV, after-school specials.

"How about kids smoking?" proposed DeAndre. His response was less tongue and cheek and more geared for shock value.

"No," was the chorus from the table of girls. DeAndre smiled to himself. It seemed he got the response he was looking for.

"I will make the first sentence and then you guys will fill in the rest," I tried to redirect them. "How about: A girl is walking down the hall to class. What could be next, Jaqueline?" I called on her, hoping she would take the ball and run with it.

Jaqueline giggled and refused to answer. Instead she grabbed Ines by the shoulders and indicated with a pointing finger that she should give the next sentence, but Ines only pulled away, laughed, and said, “I don’t know.”

“She meets some friends,” Thalía bailed out her cousin Ines with a feasible suggestion.

“And they get into a fight,” added DeAndre, who was determined to have some action. He punctuated his words with some punches into the air in front of him.

“No,” again the girls rebuffed DeAndre’s idea.

“Then they go late to class,” Ines concluded the story as if to put it out of its misery.

“When she goes into the class she gets yelled at by the teacher,” DeAndre tacked on, still hoping for even the slightest bit of action.

“Ok, that’s fine. We have a simple story. Now who wants to be the actors?” I said hurriedly, looking over to the girls for volunteers. The girls giggled and squirmed to hide behind one another.

“Pick her,” they each yelled, ducking and pointing at the others.

“Maybe we should change the story to be about boys walking down the hall,” I proposed, frustrated and realizing that time was running out. The boys reluctantly agreed and so we decided that Tony would be the main boy and DeAndre, Joe, and Fransisco would play the parts of the friends in the hall. We took the camera and filed out into the hallway to film the first shot. Amidst laughter and play fighting we finally got Tony set up to walk down the hall while Griselda filmed him.

"Ok, what's next? He meets his friends in the hall. Hey, come back here, you guys." I took on the role of director, and my cast seemed to have wandered down the hall play fighting.

"Mister, it's 5:00, I've got to go. My parents are going to be waiting for me." Ines alerted me to the fact that time had run out on our first session. In a split second the kids had their backpacks on and were walking away before I could finish saying, "See you on Monday."

Although I planned this activity to be hands-on so they would be actively engaged while learning the basics about the equipment we would be using, I failed to consider that the activity was my agenda. In order for the activity to run smoothly, I had to be the center of attention. Perhaps less teacher centered than my initial monologue, it still did not take into consideration the desires or interests of my participants. I was asking them to conform to what I wanted them to do. The only options they had in order to feel agency was not to agree to participate, as the girls did, or openly to try to ruffle feathers, as DeAndre did when he proposed what he must have known to be topics commonly frowned upon by adults in school (e.g., smoking and fighting).

I sat in the empty room after the children had left and reflected on what went wrong. I knew these children in elementary school, and they were inquisitive, lively, and eager to be engaged. Now it seemed that they had layers of protective shellac, the armor of adolescence, and it would not easily be penetrated by what I thought to be dialogic instruction. It also seemed apparent that I was not practicing what I preached.

I talked about a project where I was going to follow my participants' lead, but I introduced the entire project with a monologue about my agenda. The students had no reason to feel invested in this. The one hands-on activity I choose for them was my design, and it made them feel silly and vulnerable. I worried that I had lost them and that they would not come back for the next session. In an analytic memo dated January 7, 2004, I wrote:

> I am concerned about the shyness and the resistance but I also find it very interesting. My first thought is that I am a total loser because I can't control a group of nine kids, and I don't know enough about video production to get them on task. They seem to have taken this as an opportunity to act silly and try to get me off task. This forced me into the role of authoritarian. This is not the type of interaction I expected in a fun video club. What did I do wrong? What could I have done differently? Was it because I had the wrong sorts of activities? Did I speak too long? Do I not know how to relate to children of this age? In school I observe how apparently harsh the teachers speak to the kids, do they do this because it is the only way to get them to listen? One on one I am able to talk to all of these students. Why in a group (and such a small group) do they put up defenses?

Looking at my choice of words in my memo it seems that I had a traditional role of teacher internalized in my mind. I worried that I was not able to *control* the children, and since they did not follow my agenda I had to resort to authoritarian measures. Viewing the teacher role as that of an expert, I speculated that my lack of expertise in film production lead to my inability to keep them on task. I even began to speculate that adolescent children needed to be treated harshly in order to get them to listen and comply. This was something I had observed before at the school and felt was dehumanizing. I was shocked that the participants would act resistant to what I considered to be a "fun video club." It did not occur to me that I had structured the

first session to be fun for me, as the center of attention, and as a result it was not fun for them to be passive and follow my lead for the entire hour and a half.

The story of our first session together illustrates how students react to teacher-centered instruction. Students who are subjected to schooling that includes little opportunity for freedom in the curriculum may not develop agency about school-related issues. It would make sense that students who have very little autonomy in school would also feel little investment in school. This lack of investment would translate to a feeling that there is no good reason to exert energy trying to analyze and find solutions to problems that they have no hope to correct. To my participants during Session 1 the idea of making movies about their school experiences amounted to just another teacher-directed activity, one more example of an adult *making* them do something. What I imagined to be a "fun after-school club" was looking to my participants like more of the same old teacher-dominated activities they experience every day at school.

After the first session I reflected on the disconnect between my espoused beliefs and my actual practice. I concluded that I had to change my tactics in order to attempt to open up more space for my participants to investigate topics in a more open-ended fashion. I ran the risk of not having the critical project that I initially envisioned. That worried me, but I felt it was more important to show trust in the participants and allow them freedom to pursue what they deemed interesting and relevant. My original idea was to have one group movie project that we would all work on together. I was going to have my participants work together to generate

themes based on their school experiences and then work in small groups to develop each theme. Instead, I decided I should allow my participants to make movies about topics of their choice in groupings they decided. As Cummins (1986/2001) pointed out, the authority of the critical teacher must be dialectical; by giving up some control the teacher allows students to develop agency. He wrote,

> As teachers relinquish the authority of truth providers, they assume the mature authority of facilitators of student inquiry. In relation to such teacher authority students gain their freedom—they acquire the ability to become self-directed human agents. (p. 17)

Thinking about Cummins' words it became clear that I started off too heavy handed in my desire for critical projects done the way I envisioned them. I concluded that in order for my project to be truly critical in nature I needed to look at my interactions with the participants, more than the products of their inquiries. This meant I had to step back, trust my participants' judgments, and try to resist my colonial impulse to take over their movie projects. I was ready to accept the possibility that my participants would select topics that did not relate directly to their school experiences and that might not appear critical. This still bothered me, because I had conceptualized a group movie project that focused on schooling. I wanted to give it a try because it seemed to me that sacrificing some of my goals to give room to my participants to pursue their own would tell me much more about them as people and as students. Had I continued with my original plan, their movie would be more a reflection of my voice than theirs.

It was one thing to be cognizant that I needed to step back and follow the lead of my participants but quite another to really do it. Although I convinced myself that I wanted to let go of control, I still had certain expectations for their movies. Before I started the study I was critical of the arrogance I felt was implicit in research that claimed to empower others, but even so I secretly harbored romantic notions of transformation and consciousness raising that would result when my participants began to make their movies. Like the makebelieve movie described in the beginning of this chapter, I even fantasized that the students would gain a type of self-determination as researchers, "hijack" the project, and turn the critique back on me by questioning my motives (how egotistical is that?). My hidden desires for overtly critical movie projects by my participants were hard to suppress. I found myself struggling with the tension of not knowing how much to push when trying to guide their projects in critical directions.

I felt a great deal of self-doubt and uncertainty about my assumed role of leader/follower during the project. Throughout the course of the investigation I found myself in uncharted waters, not knowing if I was being too hands off or too heavy handed. I see-sawed between polar extremes of feeling manipulative for being too laissez-faire and feeling manipulative for trying to steer my participants in critical directions.

At times I felt guilty for setting up the situation and consciously denying guidance to my participants. In a regular classroom situation the students would have had a whole list of criteria to follow when making their movies. In contrast, in this

case I gave them the equipment and basically gave them free rein in making their movies. I wondered if my refusal to direct their projects was laissez-faire and would be interpreted that I did not care about what they were doing or that I did not have a plan (Delpit, 1995). I also worried that by neglecting to list necessary criteria their work would lack rigor necessary for research. In retrospect I probably should have brainstormed with the entire group to help them develop a list of characteristics they needed to include in their movies. However, I did not do this because I wanted each group to feel they had total control over the process of making their own movies.

Just when I felt like I might break into hives vexed about being too laissez-faire, the pendulum would swing and I worried that I was trying to hard to steer their projects, albeit indirectly. This too felt manipulative, because I was steering our group discussions in ways I hoped to influence their movie projects without directly telling them they had to address certain issues. If it was students' perspectives I was after, then why was I trying to influence their outlooks? Perhaps deep down I just could not free myself from my own arrogance. I wanted them to interpret their experiences the right way—my way—the critical way.

My push for critical projects manifested in the activities I chose for group discussions. I was the one who chose the videos we watched for discussion. I was the one who led discussions after viewing the videos, and I chose questions that led the participants' discussions in certain directions. For example, in Session 8 when we watched movies that depicted school scenes, I selected movies (like *Dangerous Minds*) that depicted students of color and White teachers. I initiated questioning

about stereotypes. This eventually led to our discussion about racism and media that is addressed in chapter 6.

When I wanted the participants to go deeper on certain topics, I chose clips of them from previous sessions for them to watch and discuss further. A good example of this took place in Session 8 when I showed them a clip of their discussion about their "boring lives." This clip was from a discussion that stemmed from watching the *Ed Couch-Elsa* video in which I hoped to generate interest in nonsensationalized depictions of their daily lives. This was something that I saw as political and counterhegemonic, but they insisted it was far too boring for treatment in a movie.

I was trying to use our discussions as a means of planting critical seeds that would be reflected in their movie projects. During our discussions about topics like racism in media and the idea of creating counterhegemonic representations of children of color, I stressed the fact that they could include such themes in their movies. Judging from the final products of their movies, it seems my efforts may have had little effect for my desired outcome. However, our discussions were fruitful, and the students showed that these are topics they think about and are able to discuss articulately.

I purposely chose a critical constructivist framework because I felt it most closely paralleled my goal of centering students' voices. I hoped that such a framework would help me step back and make room for my participants to take the lead in the investigation and therefore assume ownership of the project. The framework did work to keep me awake to the influence I had on the project and kept

me struggling to reconcile my goal of "shutting up." However, this was quite a struggle, especially given my intense desire for a critical and transformative experience. It led me to question my true motives and whether or not I was just trying to mask my power in the project. Once operationalized, the idea of being critical and constructivist often seemed like a contradiction in terms.

Student-Made Films and Videotaped Discussions as Data

The use of video was another stylistic aspect of my methodology that was an attempt to bring students' voices to the surface. Two kinds of video data are in this study, (a) student-made films and (b) videos of our group discussions. Rather than using interview as a means to solicit information about students' perspectives and then using those data to weave a narrative intended to echo their voices, I opted to have participants make their own movies and also to videotape all of our discussions. Video seemed to be a powerful medium because it was both interesting for the participants and something they could master well enough to use to express their views and therefore be somewhat autonomous. In contrast, academic writing was not necessarily an avenue of expression that my 14-year-old participants were keen on, nor was it something they were likely to excel in. It seemed to me that by using the movies I could include their perspectives with minimal tampering by my hand.

In addition to the benefits of having the movies they made serve as data, the students took turns videotaping our group discussions. The videos of our group discussions not only would show their actual words and interactions, but also would

shine a light on the process of the creation of the ideas presented. This process would include my involvement in the construction of the final representations, since the videotaped discussions would include my participation. By having the participants operate the cameras that filmed our discussions, I hoped further to emphasize the student-centered nature of the project, since I would have to look back on this data through a filter of the lens of the cameraperson. Therefore, it seemed that videos of our sessions would support my truth claims, because they would be helpful in foregrounding students' voices while also exposing my presence in the research.

As it turned out, the use of video was helpful as a methodological tool and provided a motivational spark for the participants' efforts. The use of video added a layer of complexity to the notion of soliciting and representing students' voices. A good example of the complexity of using video as a means for representing truth claims occurred in Session 2 of our after-school meetings, when my participants reflected on the possibility of observing and capturing truth on video.

We began Session 2 by watching a segment from a documentary made for HBO called *Middle School Confessions.* The segment we watched focuses on a boy named Orlando who is in trouble for skipping school. Like the majority of my participants, Orlando is Latino and in eighth grade. The video follows Orlando at school, at home, and in the streets. The video purports to be Orlando's perspective. This effect is achieved by the narrative style of Orlando talking candidly into the camera as he moves through his day. Most of the scenes show Orlando engaging in actions in a naturalistic setting. It is as if he is taking the audience on an insider's tour

of his life, including how he sneaks out of school after attendance is taken, which bus to catch to get back to his neighborhood, and scenes of himself hanging out on a playground passing a bottle with some older men.

Between these glimpses into his life are scenes of Orlando talking directly to the camera. He candidly explains that his father is in jail, his mother does not treat him like an adult, and that school does not interest him. It may not be Orlando's intention, but his words contribute to the story created about him that shows him as a troubled youth. In addition to scenes with Orlando are interviews with his mother, his school counselor, and his teachers, all of whom are concerned about him. They each describe Orlando as a smart boy who cannot resist the allure of the streets. At the end of the video Orlando is informed that he will fail eighth grade because he has missed so much school. The last scene shows him with a somber expression watching the graduation ceremony of his peers as his mother sits next to him with tears rolling down her face. Orlando comes across as a nice boy who has taken a bad path. Although left for the viewer to interpret, the message of the segment is that skipping school leads to bad things, including hurting yourself and others.

I chose to show this segment because I thought it would grab the attention of my participants. The movie is fast paced and includes popular urban music in the background. The music and the narrative style initially might lead viewers to believe the video is representative of Orlando's point of view; his words and actions carry the thread of the story, and the filmmakers' presence is not apparent. However, the implicit message shows a boy who is confused and headed for trouble because he is

making bad decisions about his life by opting for the streets over school. Orlando would not make a movie like this about himself. In fact most of his statements contradict the message of the film, but in the context of the movie they serve to support the notion that he is an adolescent who is out of control and lacks faculties of reason. Thus his statements help to relay the filmmakers' intent. I was interested to see if my participants would accept the story as it is or object to the way Orlando was depicted and critique the unstated message behind the segment. The discussion this segment generated proved to be interesting. The issues about observation and representation brought forth by my participants served to complicate my use of video to depict their voices in this study.

After watching, I asked the students their opinions about this film. I was particularly interested to know if they felt this was a good representation of a middle school student's experience. The following excerpt from the transcript of Session 2 addresses some of the participants' thoughts about the film.

> Bernice: I thought the boy was acting too tough. I thought he was acting really tough like he—
> DeAndre: Could beat up everybody
> Bernice: Like he was so cool. Like he was trying to act so cool—
> DeAndre: Trying to be a Blood.
> Me: Was he acting the way he really is?
> Bernice: No
> Nadira: It was two stories. It was not very realistic. It could be realistic but—they were too dramatic about the situation. Like him—Like I don't think his mom would let him go out like that—Like my mom would—
> (Lots of students concur.)
> Sonia: Yeah, she wouldn't let him go out like she went.
> Tony: Yeah, it's true, like your mom wouldn't let you out the door.
> (Lots of voices are going at the same time now, all talking about what their moms would do to them if they tried to go out without permission.)

DeAndre: My mom would let me . . .
Tony: That's why you are on probation
Nadira: It's believable, but it's a tad bit—
Sonia: Unbelievable
Nadira: Exactly, like I would believe if it was parent abuse, but his mom was yelling at him, too. And my mom would be yelling at me, still be yelling at me when I got home—Oh Lord!
DeAndre: My mom would talk to the police for about 4 hours.

Bernice initiated the discussion by stating that she believed Orlando, the main character, was performing a tough-guy act. The students cited the interaction Orlando had with his mother as an example that this movie was, as Nadira put it, "too dramatic" and not realistic. Most agreed that no mother would allow her child to act the way Orlando did. Specifically, he ignored her and walked out the door to go hang out in the street with his friends. The participants compared this to what they envisioned their mothers would do if they tried that. DeAndre was the only voice of dissent in this part of the discussion. He said his mother would not do anything if he acted like Orlando. Tony countered with, "That's why you are on probation." Tony's comment functioned to maintain the norm that good mothers do not allow their kids to disrespect them and go out whenever they want. DeAndre became an example of what could happen if your mother does not control your actions. Tony's statement served to support the message of the movie, support the mainstream views of the participants, and marginalize DeAndre's experience. After that, DeAndre's position drifted closer to the center when he stated, "My mother would call the police and talk to them for 4 hours."

Next, I asked the group what it would be like if a movie like this were made about them. The following selection from the discussion transcript points to the participants' skepticism of documentaries in general.

> Me: If someone made a movie like this about you, what would it be like?
> Bernice: It would show the opposite of me. Because I would know somebody is taping me, so I am not going to act bad. You know, I am going to be the opposite of how I really am.
> Tony: Yeah, that is what I would do I would do the opposite. . . . I would change my personality for the camera.
> Bernice: That is what people do on any program. I don't like watching it, because it doesn't show how you really are. It's the opposite.
> Me: People perform for a reason. So Bernice would not choose to perform the way Orlando chose to perform in that movie, but both of them are performing. Orlando wants to come across to the world as very tough—
> Tony: Macho man
> Me: —and that is what he showed in this movie. Bernice would choose to show something else if someone put the camera on her and follow her around. It would be "what an angel she is," but that may not be true to how she is inside.
> Nadira: I would think they were trying to be nosey. I don't think they should just go to people and make a documentary about them.

Bernice said she does not like documentaries because they show "the opposite" of how people really are. She explained that documentaries purport to be the truth, but she thinks they are not at all realistic. Her reasoning is that people perform for the camera. The example we just watched bothered her because, as she said earlier, she felt that Orlando was acting too tough. She believed that he was showing off for the camera. In her mind, he is not really like this but would like others to view him this way. In turn, she explained that if someone were to make a movie like this about her, she would act good, even though she does not see herself that way. She readily admitted that she is not a perfect angel but would certainly try

to portray herself that way should she be the focus of a movie. She explained that the outcome would be the same as the movie we just watched; in other words, it would be a depiction that claimed to be true but did not capture reality.

Thinking that perhaps the problem was that someone else would be making a movie about them, I changed the question slightly to ask if it would be different if they made a movie about themselves. From a methodological standpoint, this would be more aligned with my research goals of having the participants make movies about their own personal experiences.

> Me: Would you be interested in making a movie like this about yourself?
> Tony: Yes, I would.
> Jaqueline: No.
> Tony: *My Ghetto Life*.
> D: Yeah, *My Ghetto Life*—what he said. About my screwed-up life
> (The camera is focusing on Ines drawing on her hand. She notices the camera on her and laughs. She holds her hand up like she is going to give the finger but seems to not be able to bring herself to do it. She flashes the middle finger and then other fingers—with a mischievous grin.)
> Bernice: I don't think I would make one.
> DeAndre: I would do one about me and say examples you shouldn't follow.
> Me: Why do you say that?
> DeAndre: I'm on probation, that's something bad right?
> Tony: (to me) You don't want to know, you don't want to know
> Me: We'll get back to that if you want to.
> Bernice: I say no, because like I said I don't like them, because it doesn't show the truth about you.
> Me: But if you make one about yourself—
> Lots of kids: It still won't be the truth.
> Beth: Certain things I do not want to show.
> Jaqueline: It would just be like a family video. Because like when you are with your family, like you wouldn't show how you act with your brothers at home. At home when I am with my brothers I am not nice. I am very violent with my brothers. But when I am with company I don't want to show them how I really am; just like Bernice said, you want to act nice because there's a camera there.

Aside from Tony and DeAndre, who said they would like to make a movie about themselves, all of the others definitively said they would not make such a movie. Why were the boys the only ones willing to entertain the idea of making movies about themselves? Perhaps the key is in their response. Tony offered a possible title, *My Ghetto Life*. This name conjures images of popular movies about the urban experience that are often marketed for teenage boys. DeAndre's statements about having his movie be about "examples you should not follow" further supports this idea. Much like the participants' comments about Orlando trying to act tough for the camera, Tony and DeAndre seem to want to portray themselves in this manner. The macho and independent image of the urban gangster is in vogue and quite appealing to adolescent boys from all walks of life. The boys probably see a toughness and self-confidence, especially with girls, in this image as something they would like to emulate. In later sessions all of the boys decided to make movies about their lives outside of school. Although they elected not to finish the movies, they did not seem troubled by being the focus of a movie that might portray them in a way that does not capture who they truly are.

The girls, on the other hand, were not at all interested in making movies about themselves. Bernice explained again that the problem is that these movies never get at the truth. Beth agreed, stating that there are certain things she would not want made public, thus implying that she would not include them should she make a movie about herself. Jaqueline gave a concrete example of Bernice's thesis. She offered the example of the way she acts with her brothers at home. She said that she is mean to

them and often fights with them. However, when company comes she acts very nice to them, and guests thinks she is a sweet girl who is good to her siblings. Jaqueline stated that if a movie were made about her, it would be like a home movie where she does not act like herself but instead performs a good girl routine for the camera.

The statements by Bernice and Jaqueline point to a dilemma faced by anyone trying to capture and represent reality. The characters being observed are aware they are being observed and therefore will change their behaviors in response to the observer. Interestingly, they were saying this in the presence of a camera that they knew I was using to collect information to use to represent their views. As they are speaking about performing "good" for the camera, Ines playfully and mischievously gave the finger to the camera. This complicated their claims of putting on a "good girl" act.

Later in the discussion the participants discussed possible ways to get around the problem of people performing for the camera. Nadira stated that she believed interviews are the worst form of soliciting information, because people perform most for an interview. Her reasoning was that people will say things so they can come across the way they want, which is not based on how they really are. According to Nadira, since the interview is an obviously contrived interaction, the interviewee will have less trouble altering "the truth" when answering questions.

Taking the problems with interview in consideration, Beth speculated that capturing reality might be possible if the filmmaker went to a real scene and filmed people doing the things they normally do. Her idea was to do a type of "fly on the

wall" observation of a scenario. The children agreed that this would be better than interview, although still problematic. Sonia seemed to have faith in people's desire to be open about their lives; she suggested that people would need to try to act normal when they are being filmed. Ines disagreed, stating that even if people try, they will never be able to act normal with a camera present.

Nadira stated that she believed it that a documentary is an intrusion on a person's private life. She stated that the process of making a documentary is "nosey." She also pointed to the subjectivity of the filmmakers as an issue of concern. She stated, "Some people would take advantage of going towards the bad things of a person and not showing the good things or all the things." She was aware of the problematic nature of truth claims and how "reality" can be distorted even in nonfiction formats like documentary.

Much like the Liar's Paradox (i.e., a person from Crete saying, "All Cretans are liars"), the children were aware they were being filmed as they discussed the complexity of the notion of filming their peers to try to show what school is really like. They freely stated that they would not act like themselves for the camera if someone were to make a documentary about them. They struggled with issues of representation while being recorded for my project. I was intrigued by their insight while baffled by the difficulty I faced as I embarked on my mission to foreground their perspectives on schooling. They knew they were the focus of my study, and yet they were telling me that they were not being true to their real selves by virtue of being observed. Furthermore, I was intruding and being nosey for wanting to do this.

Take for example the behaviors of the children during the discussion. As they spoke about the film they watched and connected it to their lives and their ideas about documenting lives, there were constant diversions that do not get recorded in the verbal transcript. Jaqueline was operating the camera, pointing it at the table where her friends were sitting. The girls were only half listening to the group discussion while they chatted and giggled to each other. When Nadira noticed that the gaze of the video camera was on them, she covered her face and signaled to the other girls to pay attention. They all sat up and appeared to be listening to the group discussion. The girls' actions showed agreement with the statements that they would change their behaviors for the camera to cast themselves as "good girls." But even this statement is complicated by Ines' looking straight into the camera and playfully giving the finger.

Next the camera shifted over to the table where Fransisco and DeAndre had taped their mouths shut. It seemed they were bored with a conversation that had gone on too long. I cannot help wondering if they also were making a symbolic statement by taping their mouths shut and "silencing" their own voices, as if it were the only option they could find to feel agency and resist the colonial imposition of my project that requires them to speak. When DeAndre noticed the camera he did not signal to the other boys to pay attention, as Nadira did; he simply held up his middle finger (Figure 4). I am left wondering for whom that finger was meant. Could it be directed at Jaqueline for pointing the camera at him, for me since he knew I would be watching the video, or for his construction of himself because he wanted to come across as a tough kid on probation? The boys' actions were similar to the participants'

critiques of Orlando in the movie; it is not that they did not care how they are portrayed, their performance was designed to show they are not "good boys." Their disinterest and resistance is obvious for the viewers.

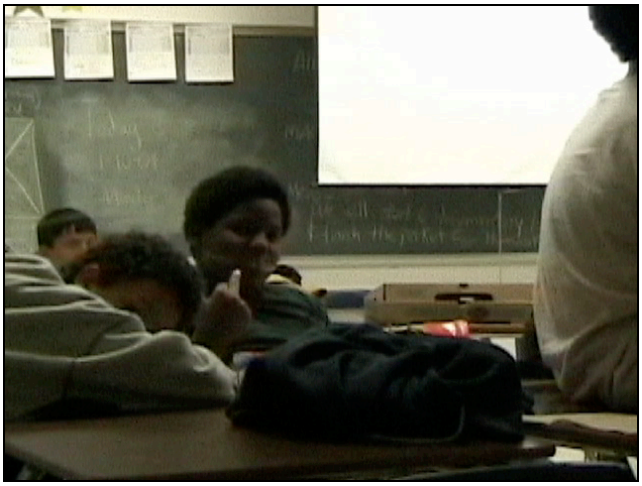

Figure 4. DeAndre with his mouth taped shut gives the finger to the camera.

Although the girls and boys wanted to be seen in different ways by the gaze of the camera, their behaviors during discussion paralleled in that they were not attending fully to the discussion I was leading. Both groups appeared to be bored after the discussion went on longer than it probably should have. I was responsible for this because I was the one who kept pushing them by asking more questions. The paradox here is that I was controlling the flow of the conversation by selecting the questions and continuing to ask them, even after the participants had lost interest. Whose voice is really foregrounded when the researcher pushes for answers?

This anecdote serves to show the participants' voices on matters of their own representation and also highlights the problematic nature of attempting to represent their perspectives. Am I going to portray my participants in the ways they stated they would portray themselves if the focus of a documentary? Or am I going to try to capture how they "truly" are? Given that they openly stated in front of the camera that they would not be themselves when on film, should I believe any of the statements they made? I am left with the question: Is it possible for me to foreground my participants' voices at all?

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to address the challenges I faced when attempting to identify and portray students' perceptions. I have found that representing the perspectives of participants is anything but a straightforward task. At times it even seems like an impossible task. However, it is still an important and worthwhile endeavor. When I worked at the refugee camp as a naïve teenager I had the honor of working alongside an immigration attorney who taught me a valuable lesson through her actions. Every day she worked tirelessly researching and filing political asylum cases for the countless Salvadoran and Guatemalan people who lived at the camp. Although they were fleeing war-torn countries, the U.S. government did not consider their cases to be worthy of asylum. This lawyer rarely won a case; in fact, it seemed futile to many that she continued to go to court time after time. It did not, however, stop her from continuing her struggle for justice. It is my hope that my work to

foreground students' voices may in some small way parallel the work of my attorney friend. It is a message I believe in and something I consider to be part of a struggle for a more equitable and just society, even though the work at times seems futile.

With this said, I am still plagued with the dilemma of how to reconcile the tensions and contradictions I have presented in this chapter with the preceding data chapters that are supposed to represent my participants' voices. Given that their voices are filtered through me, I have tried to deal with the responsibility of representing them as complex and respectful as I could. I have tried to paint pictures of each of my participants as highly intelligent and complex individuals who recognize themselves as part of different societal groups based on race, class, and gender but do not see the groupings as monolithic or static. I attempted to write about them without sensationalizing their stories or overly romanticizing them.

I had to make a choice about how to depict each of the participants in my study. Some examples of what I hope to have captured are the following: (a) Jaqueline's desire to be portrayed as a "good girl" like she behaves on a family video; (b) Bernice's desire to be seen as a "unique individual" and her somewhat cynical and inquisitive nature that often flies under the radar of her teachers; (c) DeAndre's posturing as a tough thug along with his wealth of knowledge, sensitivity, and leadership skills; (d) Sonia's assertions of being "normal" and "boring" along with her pride and recognition of the importance of her background as a Zapoteca and a Jehovah's Witness; and (e) Beth's politically conservative worldview influenced by her Whiteness alongside her cultural awareness and sensitivity.

These are complex characters that I could not have invented in my wildest imagination. Rather than see these traits in my participants as contradictions, I think they should be celebrated as beautifully messy embodiments of real life. They are young teens and as only young teens can be they stand at a crossroads in life and refuse to take either path. It is a wonderful time of searching for independence and for belonging. It is a moment in life when fairness is of urgent concern. They are the volatile teens that we as adults often fear, especially when we imagine trying to be their teacher. We fear their unpredictable and raw emotions and their refusal to see the world in simple black and white. If for a moment we put aside our fears and our impulse to try to control them and instead listen to what they have to say, perhaps we could relearn a valuable lesson in life.

Chapter 9

Implications for Students' Voices Research

This study asked the question, what do middle school students have to say about their school experiences? Using video as a medium, 11 middle school participants expressed their perceptions of schooling and society. I admit that my secret fantasy when going into Live Oak with the purpose of soliciting students' voices was to open a door, both literally and figuratively, and find behind it something like the cafeteria scene from the movie *Fame*. My romantic notion of students' voices had Irene Cara jumping on the table belting out her song to the accompaniment of classmates who spontaneously pick up their spoons and tap rhythm on their trays. Like in the movie, I imagined an amalgamation of people dancing and voices harmonizing in a wonderful self-affirming explosion of multicultural pride. This is not exactly what I found; I saw no singing or dancing. However, like others who have conducted research on students' voices, I found my middle school participants had plenty to say (Oldfather, 1995), were quite articulate expressing themselves (Powell, 2001), and held views aligned with research on school reform (Nieto, 1994).

In this chapter I return to the themes brought forward by the participants of this study with an eye toward understanding how curriculum can be structured to better meet the needs of all young people. I use Nieto's (1999) tenets of critical multicultural education to analyze implications for teachers based on the voices of my

participants. Based on my research findings I propose some additional implications geared specifically to White teachers in multiracial contexts. Then, I suggest some areas for future research. I conclude with reflections on social justice and education.

Learning from Students' Voices

The voices of my 11 participants from their movies and their discussions provide insight into the ways they interpret their experiences both at school and in society. The input of my participants is valuable for teachers and researchers who wish to better serve middle school students. Before I continue, a caveat is in order. Although the participants in my study represent a diverse group ethnically, racially, in gender, and in academic tracks, in no way are their stories meant to be generalized to all students who share some of their socially constructed identifiers. As they demanded time and time again, each of their stories is unique. For example, Beth is a White girl from a working-class family. She is a successful student on the highest academic track at Live Oak. By sharing her story I am not suggesting that it parallels the story of all White students, all girls, or all working-class youth. The same could be said for any of my participants who are Latino/a, African American, in special education, in a magnet program, with Spanish as a first language, or with English as a first language. However, because they represent a broad sample of young people in our schools, their stories highlight some key issues about schooling in a multicultural society (Nieto, 2000). I hope their stories, and the story of our interactions while

conducting research, provide useful information about students in similar circumstances.

In this section, three major categories that emerged from my participants' perspectives are reviewed. (a) freedom, pedagogical and societal; (b) the importance of race and ethnicity and pride in culture and in being a unique individual; and (c) the key role of outlets—activities, interests, and personal connections outside of academics—in sustaining students enthusiasm and motivation for school.

Freedom

Perhaps it is not surprising that one of the strongest outcomes to emerge from the perspectives of the early adolescents' pertained to freedom. Freedom is a construct that is held in high importance in our society and often takes on special significance in the teenage years. The students discussed two forms of freedom, pedagogical and societal, that are both distinct and confounded by race and academic track.

Pedagogical freedom refers to students' autonomy within the curriculum. Most of the students in this study yearned for more freedom to pursue topics of personal interest and to work on project-related tasks that allowed for flexible and collaborative groupings with peers. The video, *A Day at School,* juxtaposed a teacher-centered curriculum common in most core academic classes with a more hands-on and experiential curriculum that is characteristic of some elective courses. The discussions that arose out of watching *A Day at School* further highlighted the

frustration felt by many of the participants about the top–down style of the transmission model of teaching. They expressed feelings that school was not interesting, that teachers try to dominate students, and that what they are asked to do in school is not purposeful to their lives. The students cited examples of teachers lecturing to whole classes and then assigning worksheets as busy work. Even PE, which seemed to lend itself to authentic application, was characterized by drilling isolated skills. This atmosphere led to student alienation, boredom, resistance, and ultimately the feeling that school is not a place where they can express agency. Perhaps the strongest example of teacher domination and the squashing of student agency came when Bernice and Thalía were filming the movie *A Day at School* and were censored by their Language Arts teacher.

The one participant who did not share the negative view of schooling as disempowering was Beth. It is not a coincidence that she was the only White participant in the study and was on the highest academic track. According to Beth, school is an engaging place where students' ideas are taken seriously and inquiry is fostered. She was able to give specific examples that supported her claims, including high-level discussions in English class, discussions about politics with peers, and writing plays to be performed in drama club.

Societal freedom refers to the notion that all people have agency and in democracy have freedom based on equality of opportunity. This construct is closely tied to meritocracy, that those with higher ability and drive will be the most successful. The fact that Beth, who found school engaging, was the only White

participant may raise some eyebrows. The fact that she is the only one who seems to feel agency in school is tied to societal freedom. Though the ideal of meritocracy is still prevalent in our society, institutional and societal racism lead to the privileging of Whites over all others and therefore expose the construct as a pernicious myth.

The discussions of my participants based on the viewing of Hollywood movies and professionally made documentaries led to the expressed viewpoints of many of my participants of color about the devastating and inequitable effects of societal racism. Their articulate views of racism based on personal experience and observation of society at large, in contrast to Beth's steadfast belief in individual meritocracy, support research that maintains a bifurcated society characterized by White domination and a blind eye turned on issues of racism by many well-intentioned, White people (e.g., Howard, 1999; Sheets, 2005). Beth's movie project, *Does Freedom Exist?* was inspired by a set of discussions on racism that caused her to feel disequilibrium about the notion of meritocracy. The design of her documentary even took into consideration the diversity of experience based on culture and gender. She actively sought perspectives from men and women of different nationalities. The hegemony of meritocracy ultimately won out, and her moviemaking experience seemed to support her strong views on societal freedom. This serves to highlight the power dominant views hold over us in society and the difficulty faced by teachers who wish to spur White students into an analysis of White racism.

Race and Ethnicity: Pride in Culture and in Being a Unique Individual

Another important theme that emerged from my participants' voices was based on their views of race and ethnicity. In case studies of 12 diverse students, Nieto (2000) found that the young people interviewed were proud of and derived strength from their cultural heritage. However, the assimilationist messages from society cause some conflict in individuals who feel a positive sense of cultural identification. The participants in my study expressed similar conflicted feelings of pride in ethnic/racial group affiliation along with the demand of being seen as a unique individual.

The participants in my study were eager to talk about issues of culture and race. They expressed a sense of pride in their own cultural backgrounds. Most of my participants felt like Bernice when she stated she is "100% Mexican." When she said this, she did not mean she was not American, she was affirming the importance of Mexican culture in her life. In the movie *Groups in our School*, the moviemakers documented the way children at school primarily grouped themselves socially along racial and ethnic lines. Although they did not have a good explanation for this phenomenon, they recognized that it stood in contrast to the assimilationist messages promoted in society.

The participants of color expressed frustration with White teachers who do not seem to "get it." What the young people of color were referring to was the importance of culture in their learning. Bernice, who knew I worked at the university teaching a class to preservice teachers, asked, "How can they [White teachers] get all the way

through the university and reach their goal [of becoming a teacher] and not know about their students?" This is a good question that deserves a serious answer. She and the other participants of color were asking for teachers who recognize the importance of multicultural curriculum. In their discussion about culturally relevant pedagogy my participants talked about their experience with teachers of color and expressed that they do address culture in their courses. According to my participants, this helps make the learning more meaningful for them. The participants gave examples of White teachers who address culture; however, they are more of an anomaly. Sonia spoke for many of the participants when she expressed agreement with the seventh-grade teacher who stressed Mexican history, telling his students that it was important for them to know about *their* history.

Related to the issue of culture, racism was a topic that my participants were eager to address. They were quite articulate about the effects of societal racism and pointed out instances of it in movies and television. Ines and Joe were particularly articulate about their frustrations with societal racism when they critiqued the "hero's journey" depicted in the movie *Dangerous Minds*. As they pointed out, media is almost always from a White person's perspective. The teacher-hero in this case was a White woman, and the "wild" students were African American and Latino. The fact that the movie purported to be a true story only added to the obvious racism behind the decision to depict this particular classroom in a movie. What they asked for was plurality. Not only do they want depictions of youth of color who are not cast in stereotypically negative ways, they also want a plurality of perspectives. This means

programming needs to represent diverse perspectives. Ines and Joe pointed out that the overwhelming majority of media comes from a White perspective. The options for seeing people of color, and especially shows created by people of color, are very limited.

I found that the participants in my study were able to identify both as American and as belonging to their cultural group. However, they seemed to have some conflict based on the pressures of assimilation. Such conflict is not surprising, since the rhetoric of U.S. society has been characterized as temporary, illustrated by terms such as "the great melting pot" (Nieto, 2000). Some of the conflicting feelings surfaced when my participants discussed the possibility of making autobiographical movies. Sonia expressed the feeling that she is "normal" and basically shares the same culture as her teachers. Her use of a word like *normal* and her insistence that her life is not a good representative of "Mexican culture" highlight the pressure to assimilate. Interestingly, these comments by Sonia came shortly after, and seemed to stand in direct contradiction to, her assertion that teachers who address Mexican culture in the curriculum better meet her needs as a learner.

One way that the young people seem to have reconciled their conflicting feelings about being both "American" and "Mexican" was to stress that they are all unique individuals. Perhaps this is also an attribute of adolescence and of rugged individualism that is honored in the United States. However, it also seems to serve my participants as a means to claim cultural group identity and "Americanness."

The conflicted feelings of the participants in my study along with their intense desire to discuss issues of culture, race, and racism indicate the importance of addressing such issues in school. School subjects are traditionally taught as if politically neutral. Information is often presented as if free of conflict and controversy. What my participants' voices made clear is that avoidance of "hot topics" such as racism is not neutral. In fact, by attempting to avoid topics uncomfortable for many White people, teachers are denying students the opportunity to sort through burning issues that are in the forefront of their minds.

The Importance of Outlets

The voices of the youth in this study related stories of curricular and academic experiences that were largely mismatched from their lives. Even with the curricular mismatch, my participants are happy, interesting, engaging young people. The students in my study identified outlets, aspects of their lives where they show passion and intellectual and social engagement, as important components in their learning and in life. I identified three main types of outlets reported by my participants: (a) school-based outlets, (b) community-based outlets, and (c) personal outlets. In each case the outlets offered to the young people components that were lacking in their core academic experiences at school. Some of the important roles fulfilled by the outlets include intellectual engagement, hands-on experiences in authentic contexts, a sense of belonging, and critical thinking skills.

School is not meeting the needs of the majority of the participants in my study. They reported experiencing extreme boredom and fail to see the connection between what they are asked to do in school with their lives. These young people seek outlets in a variety of places in order to feel a sense of engagement and passion. Researchers and teachers need to strive to bridge students' interests, their passions in life, to their experiences at school. Only then will school become an intellectually engaging place that is valued by young people. Until educators open up their minds, and in turn schools open their doors, to the power of tapping into students' values and their dreams, brilliant young people like DeAndre and Bernice will fall through the cracks or be pushed out of opportunities for academic success. The "one size fits all" approach does not take into consideration the plurality of interests and experiences young people bring to school. This is not equity in schooling. This reality stands in direct opposition to the espoused values of American democracy.

Implications for Teachers

Shedding Light on Multicultural Education

Nieto (1999) pointed out, "Students' views are often on target in terms of current thinking in education" (p. 193). The students Nieto interviewed for case studies had views on teaching and learning strikingly consistent with research on learning theory, cognitive science, and sociology (Nieto, 1999). Not only did the views of my participants corroborate Nieto's findings, they also were remarkably

consistent with the voices foregrounded in her research. The themes of pedagogical freedom, culturally relevant pedagogy, and the importance of outlets pointed out by my participants were quite similar to the themes highlighted by Nieto's participants.

It is one thing to excavate students' voices about schooling; however, the next step must be to devise ways to incorporate them into a plan of action to improve the quality of education for all students. What can teachers do if they want to take to heart what young people are saying about their educational experiences? How can students' critiques of schooling assist teachers in devising ways to transform curriculum to be more meaningful for their students?

As an answer to these questions Nieto (1999) advocated a critical multicultural education perspective. Critical multicultural education is not merely education that emphasizes superficial aspects of students' culture, such as food, clothing, and holidays. Nieto (2000) conceptualized critical multicultural education as broad-based school reform that goes beyond superficial aspects of culture and promotes critical thinking. She proposed six ways critical multicultural education can shed light on the experiences of young people who have been excluded from traditional schooling. I include her tenets of critical multicultural education because they provide a useful lens from which to view my participants' voices and translate them into sound pedagogical practice that meets the needs of a pluralistic student population (Nieto, 1999):

1. Critical multicultural education affirms students' culture without trivializing the concept of culture itself. The participants in my study clearly

understand the complexity of culture as dynamic. They refuse the static and stereotypical depictions of people from various cultures that are typical in mainstream media and in traditional schooling. Sonia and Bernice, for example, are not willing to accept categorization as "typical" Mexicans; however, they do feel pride in their heritage and appreciate teachers' attempts to bring Mexican history into the curriculum. A critical multicultural education would make room for students to explore various aspects of identity and carefully avoid essentializing culture.

2. Critical multicultural education challenges hegemonic knowledge. In critical multiculturalism students are not asked to simply accept what is taught in school as factual knowledge. Joe and Ines were particularly critical of stereotypical representations in mainstream media and the societal racism that leads to its prevalence. At school the White teachers who only teach "American" history were provided as an example of the promotion of "official knowledge" that led to the alienation of students of color. A strong emphasis on critical thinking demands that all knowledge be taught critically.

3. Critical multicultural education complicates pedagogy. A one-size-fits-all approach to teaching does not meet the needs of all students. Most of the participants in my study were critical of traditional transmission teaching and yearned for active engagement with materials and with each other. However, Beth was for the most part content with her teachers' style of instruction. The Latina girls attending the magnet (Sonia, Bernice, Thalía, and Ines) shared many of the same classes as Beth but interpreted their experiences quite differently, demonstrating that there is no simple

formula for good teaching. Good teaching always will depend on the context and the individual teachers and students in the classroom. Critical multiculturalism complicates notions of equity in education by recognizing that *equal* does not mean the *same*.

4. Critical multicultural education problematizes a simplistic focus on self-esteem. Critical multicultural education recognizes that self-esteem operates in relation to particular situations. There is no question that self-esteem, feeling good about oneself, is an important quality and beneficial to student success. Yet, how schools play a role in affirming students' self-concepts or the creation of low self-esteem is vital to consider. In the case of Beth, experiences in school seem to reinforce her belief in her intellectual abilities. In turn, she continues to push herself academically and expresses a tremendous amount of self-confidence and agency. Bernice and Thalía certainly proved their high intelligence during the course of this study; however, school experiences have caused them to cast doubt on their intellectual and academic abilities. DeAndre's case is even more extreme; school experiences seem to have been so unconnected to his life and the message so damning to him that the idea of being an academically successful student does not even cross his mind as a remote possibility. Critical multiculturalism with its focus on critical thinking and "dangerous discourses" would help students like DeAndre, Bernice, and Thalía realize that school can be a place for complex thinking and that they indeed have a great deal to offer in the way of intellect.

5. Critical multicultural education encourages "dangerous discourses."

Important issues are on the minds of students, many of which are the issues most avoided in traditional schooling. They are avoided because teachers fear conflict or uncomfortable situations. Therefore, teachers often make an effort to make school learning "neutral." Avoiding burning topics is not neutral; it is neglectful and often leads to alienation. The participants of color wanted—they needed—to talk about racism. To skirt around an issue like societal racism would be to negate their personal experiences and actively to teach these young people that school is not a hospitable place for them. Bernice showed cynicism about teachers who feel they must always be "experts," some of whom are even willing take the most authoritarian measures to squash students' inquiry to avoid the threat of not being "the one who knows." Beth did not seem to desire to talk about racism. Her experiences at school seem to reinforce her beliefs in meritocracy. Conversations about societal inequity, such as racism, are needed for White students like Beth. School should be a place for intellectual stimulation; the experiences of disequilibrium felt by Beth when she engaged in uncomfortable conversations that problematized her worldview were opportunities for her to reflect on some of her taken-for-granted assumptions. This should be a component of all White schoolchildren's experiences in a struggle to build equality in our society. Critical multicultural education does not shy away from controversial and complicated topics; instead, this pedagogy invites discussion and debate and does not purport to have all the answers.

6. Multicultural education by itself cannot do it all. Nieto (1999) noted that multicultural education is a hopeful pedagogy. However, it not an illusory hope that positions pedagogy as a silver bullet to cure society of all its problems; "the critical perspective makes it clear that multicultural education is not a panacea" (p. 209). DeAndre and Bernice have bigger problems than boring classes and meaningless worksheets. A great education that "fits" will not change the fact that racism poses a tremendous obstacle in the lives of my participants outside of school. Political activity is needed both within and outside the classroom to strive for the realization of the democratic ideals of our society. Critical multicultural education involves pedagogy and curriculum but also must extend outside of the classroom and beyond the walls of the school.

We Must Teach What We Cannot Know: Implications for White Teachers

This section is geared towards White teachers, especially the many White teachers who work in multicultural contexts and find themselves struggling with how best to employ multicultural pedagogy in their own practice. Gary Howard is a White teacher-researcher with many years of experience in the field of multicultural education. Though I agree with a great deal of what he has to say, I find the title of Howard's (1999) recent book, *We Can't Teach What We Don't Know: White Teachers, Multiracial Schools,* hugely problematic. The idea that White teachers can truly *know* racism, *know* the experience of cultural "others," or even *know* multicultural pedagogy is an oversimplification and perhaps even a bit presumptuous.

However, I do applaud the effort to address this difficult topic and the fact that his book attempts to add to a conversation about White racism, a topic that only recently has been addressed by White researchers (Scheurich, 2002). This section is in reaction to Howard's book title. I gently critique his title with a great deal of respect for his knowledge and experience, which far exceeds mine.

As a White teacher-researcher working in multicultural contexts, I hope that one contribution of my research will be to add to the conversation about the role of white teachers teaching across difference. Considering White dominance in our racist society (Howard, 1999) and the embedded nature of racism in "commonsense understandings" of White people (Sleeter & Montecinos, 1999), it is reasonable to assert that critical multiculturalism should take different forms, depending on the positionality of the teacher. Specifically, White teachers need to make some reflexive decisions about their pedagogy when engaging in critical multicultural education. Since the majority of teachers in this country are White and middle class and the majority of students in public schools are children of color, attention must be paid to the ways critical multicultural education can be managed by White teachers.

Standing on the shoulders of giants, I most humbly would like to build on the work of Sonia Nieto (1999) and others who write about antiracist pedagogy and specifically critical multicultural education, to add some ideas for White teachers attempting to incorporate the tenets of critical multicultural education. Four points emerged from my research that I believe will help inform White teachers interested in critical multicultural education:

1. Teaching is not charity work
2. Constructivism can be a tool to keep White dominance in check.
3. Humility on the part of the teacher is crucial.
4. Culturally relevant pedagogy is not always "mining."

Teaching is not Charity Work

Many well-intentioned, White teachers seem to be driven to teach by what appears to be pity for their "deprived" students. It is quite common to hear teachers discussing the home life of one of their students in terms that indicate "deficit thinking" (Valencia, 1997). Perhaps this makes the teacher feel very good about him or herself. It may even relieve some of the stress of student failure, but it is damaging and patronizing to the students.

It seems that mainstream society loves to hold the teacher, especially the White teacher in multiracial contexts, up as a martyr or savior (Popkewitz, 1998). The construct of teacher savior is evident in the movie *Dangerous Minds.* After viewing, my participants were quick to identify this movie as a typical "hero's journey" and were highly critical of the way in which both the White teacher was cast as hero and the students of color were depicted as "wild." For my participants, this movie was a concrete example of societal racism and racism in media.

Unfortunately, the myth of White teacher-hero is prevalent in our society. Each semester when I ask my undergraduate preservice teachers about their favorite movies, more than a handful always mention *Dangerous Minds* as one of their

primary motivations for wanting to be a teacher. Freire (1970) called this type of motivation paternalism and stated that it is contrary to empowering education. He wrote,

> Pedagogy which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression. (p. 36)

Once White teachers recognize the paternalism in viewing their work as charity, there are possibilities for less oppressive interactions. Sleeter and Montecinos (1999) advocated for White teachers to form partnerships with community-based efforts and therefore take power out of the hands of "experts." Rather than viewing their role as "providing service to" communities, the educator engages in "service with" communities. I believe this is a more equitable position.

Constructivism Can Be a Tool to Keep White Dominance in Check

When I talk about constructivism, I mean student-centered curricula based on open-ended and collaborative inquiry (e.g., Duckworth, 1987). This has been criticized as laissez-faire (O'Loughlin, 1995) and could easily be misconstrued as a copout if seen as White teachers' avoiding teaching the "codes of power" (Delpit, 1995). However, constructivist teaching does not have to be laissez-faire or skirt around important issues that may require teacher guidance. In addition, there are compelling reasons to advocate constructivism for White teachers working in multiracial contexts.

White teachers come into the classroom with societal privilege, which often translates to feelings that they know what is best for others (Howard, 1999). Imagine a White teacher teaching multicultural curriculum to a class of students who are primarily students of color. Now imagine this teacher doing so in a traditional teacher-centered fashion. I can think of nothing more condescending and colonial.

The teacher in my example quite likely has read more about multicultural education and social activism than his/her students. He/she may have even attended one or more workshops about multicultural education. However, knowing intellectually about a topic cannot translate into "expert" status and therefore give license to "teach" about oppression. To do so is to reproduce the very oppression one is teaching about.

Following the lead of the young people in the class provides White teachers with opportunities to learn about their students. In addition, it allows sharing of the role of "expert." Contrary to the notion that constructivism leads to avoidance of important teaching, opening the floor to the interests of students allows for the treatment of "dangerous discourses" (Nieto, 1999), such as racism and sexism, often left out of traditional curricula. The act of following students in itself becomes a form of refusing to reproduce the dominance common in society and schooling.

I see a parallel in constructivist pedagogy and multicultural education in that advocates of each are very passionate, but the implementation of each draws a lot of criticism. In part I believe the criticism stems from the fact that both pedagogies are contrary to traditional practice. Another problem exists: Each practice has many

manifestations and thus it is difficult to pinpoint and identify concrete examples in practice. It seems that educators who are well intentioned often misinterpret the praxis of each. Constructivism does not mean "do whatever you want" any more than multicultural education means "only address superficial aspects of culture like food, clothing, and festivals." I believe that constructivism and critical multiculturalism are not only complimentary for the White teacher, but also imperative.

Humility on the Part of the Teacher is Crucial

Humility is a slippery concept. I may be accused of arrogance for the mere fact that I include it as a necessary component for White teachers. However, the idea that teachers must be humble is tied to the idea of constructivism and critical multiculturalism detailed in the preceding section. In order to make space for a student-centered curriculum, the teacher must value what the students know and desire. This is not possible until White teachers recognize their impulse to dominate and feel they know what is best for others (Howard, 1999). Becoming a follower-guide rather than a leader requires humility.

Sheets (2000) critiqued Howard's (1999) position that White teachers need to gain an "activist White identity" and become "[social] change agents." Sheets (2000) explained that this may make the teachers feel good about themselves, but it certainly does not ensure that they will have the instructional skills and techniques to better serve children of color. This really should be the ultimate goal, and, as Sheets (2000)

pointed out, White teachers are not the best equipped for such matters. I quote her at length because what she wrote is highly relevant:

> Education may possibly be an area of study and practice, where White scholars and teachers are not automatically positioned in their dominant societal space perceived as normal. In most cases, they are culturally disadvantaged, experientially limited, and often linguistically deficient in both preparing and teaching the nation's recipients of this knowledge and service—children of color. The large number of White teachers being prepared by White professors to teach children of color is a critical issue, but a White movement in multicultural education, as currently framed, to further empower White individuals may not be the solution. (Sheets, 2000, p. 19)

Perhaps if White teachers begin to recognize that they are "culturally disadvantaged, experientially limited, and often linguistically deficient," especially when it comes to working with children of color, than there is hope for the humility required to be a follower.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy Is not Always "Mining"

School is often a mismatch with the culture of students of color, which often leads to alienation and school failure (Nieto, 2000). Culturally relevant pedagogy is one answer to this problem. Ladson-Billings (1994) provided an in-depth discussion of culturally relevant pedagogy. Making classrooms more inclusive often leads teachers to efforts to bring students' lived experiences into the curriculum. In contrast to transmission or banking models of instruction, *mining* is the idea that teachers can excavate knowledge from students as a starting point for their school learning. However, when teaching across differences, White teachers need to be aware that

mining is not the answer to all problems; in fact, if not carefully considered it can be quite problematic.

Recently a White teacher friend of mine invited me to visit his class. He knew I was interested in culturally relevant teaching, and he was particularly excited about how he was incorporating children's lives into his eighth-grade language arts class. His class of 22 was composed principally of Latino students with the exception of 4 African American students. He began by reading a writing sample from a former student. The beautifully written essay unfolded the haunting story of the conflicted feelings of the author, whose father is currently in jail for raping her younger sister. After reading the essay this teacher announced to the class that they could now begin a prewriting activity about their own experiences in the neighborhood or at home. After a moment of silence an African American youngster leaned over to the boy next to him and said, in a voice loud enough for the entire class to hear, "I'm not telling my business."

I feel sure that this teacher's intentions were good. He merely wanted to engage his students in a critical reflection about life and to do so in a meaningful way based in their personal experiences. However, the way it was framed he might as well have said, "I know your lives are all messed up, so give me your dirty laundry." What this teacher inadvertently was doing was sensationalizing "the other" (Fine, 1994). By sharing only one example, and that being of a girl with tremendous problems, he communicated the message that he believes that his current students share these types of problems. He also communicated that these are what they should be writing about.

I did not share this story because I think I am somehow superior, or more enlightened, than this teacher. Just look back at my data and think about what I did in this study. I was so eager to have my participants tell the stories of their "normal" and "boring" lives to counter the sensational depictions of urban youth of color so prevalent in media that I practically beat them over the head with the idea, until finally I figured out that they really were not interested in doing this for me. Going into this study I was so sure I was doing the right thing, only to find that I was wrong to place the burden of teaching their culture to the ignorant White teacher on the shoulders of my participants of color (Sheets, 2000).

I have no doubt that showing respect for the backgrounds of all children, especially children of color whose cultures all too often have been marginalized in school, is appropriate and important. However, teachers must not forget that culture should not be trivialized, essentialized, or forced in the curriculum. Nieto (1999) pointed to examples of her participants who found interest in school subjects outside their life experiences. Culturally relevant pedagogy must be more than cosmetically relevant.

I conclude this section by pointing out that the word *mining* implies an active miner digging up goodies from a passive mine (the learner). Although mining in education is meant to symbolize constructivist practice, the metaphor leaves me wondering if it really challenges the status quo of teacher-centered curriculum. Using students' lives as a focal point certainly sounds appealing, but as is the case in the examples mentioned, slightly below the surface lies teacher-centered pedagogy.

Implications for Future Research on Students' Voices

I had mixed feelings about writing this section. I worry that research that purports to be foregrounding students' voices, including my own, can be misleading and perhaps even deceptive. I worry that White researchers, like myself, looking for ways to promote equity and plurality in education inadvertently may be looking for ways to give themselves a self-aggrandizing pat on the back. I worry that by doing so we are not only reproducing the status quo by using White privilege to gain access to the field of multicultural education and race-based studies, but also using participants of color in the process. I had reservations about writing about future research because if this research is perceived to be self-serving, colonial, insensitive, and racist, then I am ashamed and should be the last person to offer suggestions for more research.

It was my intention to silence my own voice, or at least to turn the volume down in certain opportune moments long enough to allow my participants' voices to be heard. I conceptualized a study, using video, intended to encourage a degree of autonomy for my participants to make their own representations of their own findings. I found that this concept in itself is quite problematic. My participants did not necessarily share my desires to conduct research on their school experiences, and even if they did my fingerprint would still have been all over their products. Even with the problematic nature of the design, I still believe research on students' voices is valuable and necessary for the struggle to create more equitable schools that better serve all students. How, then, can this type of research be conducted in an honest way

and to give voice to young people? To search for an answer to that question is an area for future research.

I believe one way to answer that question is to say that research that is reported in a reflexive manner at least will shed light on the authorial presence of the primary investigator. I hope my research has achieved a degree of reflexivity. Searching for new ways to be critically reflexive and to include polyphonic texts to represent the multiple voices present in research is another area that is in need of future research.

Given that any qualitative study is not intended for generalization but instead to highlight the uniqueness and the common found in specific situations, there is always room for more studies of students' voices. My participants represent the views of 11 middle school students. I hope their stories resonate with readers. Other students will also have compelling stories to tell and important perspectives to consider. The more we learn about students' perceptions of schooling in different contexts, the better suited we will be to deal with issues of appropriate pedagogy and school reform.

Social Justice

This was intended to be a dissertation about social justice and education. The impetus for soliciting students' voices was to make space for the stakeholders of educational reform to take part in the conversation about their own schooling. The stories that surfaced as a result are stories of perseverance, potential, pain, passion,

boredom, alienation, authoritarianism, resistance, hope, and dreams. In other words, they represent a day in the life of middle school.

As I have said, the perceptions of the 11 participants in this study are not meant for generalization to all children. They are unique individuals. To quote Bernice, "I am unique, there is no one like me. . . . We all have different lives." Conversely, elements of each of their stories resonate beyond their personal experiences. Across this country are millions of children like DeAndre and millions of children like Bernice. Many children of color across the country share similar rage-inspiring stories of schools that do not fit.

What kind of society do we live in where a young person who knows everything there is to know about Yu-Gi-Oh and who can communicate this knowledge with passion, creativity, and a brilliant sense of humor can be considered unteachable and carted off to special education to rot in a worksheet-driven, meaningless curriculum? What is it about our society that has led this enormously intelligent and charismatic 14-year-old to believe that the only life he is suited for is the thug's life? It is a racist society, because the path that DeAndre walks is based on the color of his skin. If he were a White child, he likely would have been identified as gifted and talented and would have shared classrooms with all those other boys who keep volumes of notebooks with all the stats of their Yu-Gi-Oh exploits safely guarded in their bedrooms.

How is it possible that we as a society allow children like Bernice and Thalía to enter a magnet program as excited young learners and 3 years later to exit

questioning their intelligence? How can we allow these children who have shown critical thinking—in spite of their school experiences, not because of them—to slip away, no longer passionate about their academic futures? That is a crime committed by our educational system and society as a whole.

These travesties of justice happen every day across the United States. How can well-intentioned and good people know that this is happening and still sleep at night? How can we know this is happening and blame the very students for the failure of the schools to provide them with their democratic right to a quality education? All of this happens because we live in a society that is blinded by the myth of meritocracy. Those of us who benefit from inequity need this myth to continue with our lifestyles based on domination and privilege.

I am not foolish enough to believe that any curriculum can correct all of the ills of our society. However, with the right kind of curriculum DeAndre would be a superstar student and maybe not a 14-year-old on probation. If critical thinking and self-determination were characteristics of schooling for all students, then maybe Bernice and Thalía would still be in a magnet program. If classrooms across the country emphasized hands-on and collaborative learning, maybe Sonia, Joe, and Tony would not hate school, and perhaps Ines would not have failed Algebra in eighth grade. If the curricula of all schools took active measures to respect the culture of students and to address issues of racism and societal inequity, maybe Jaqueline would not have suggested that Joe and Ines "watch the Spanish channel" and "be happy" when they want to see Latino people depicted in media and not always be drug

dealers, and Beth might look at the issue of freedom in our country with a slightly more critical lens. These things may not answer all the problems we face in our unequal society, but they certainly seem like a step in the right direction.

A Prayer for Public Schools

Is there room for prayer in a dissertation about education? Some people may say no because for them prayer represents a fatalistic worldview that is antiscientific, even superstitious. I disagree; I think in these urgent times there is no room not to pray. Let me clarify: I have no hidden agenda to fuse church and state, Lord only knows there are enough people trying to do that already. However, here I believe a prayer is in order because "to pray is to wish, but with more passion" (Cardenal & Solle, 1985). In fact, a prayer is a most intense sort of wish, one that is reserved for issues of the utmost importance. It is a prayer in the form of a poem that inspired this project, and therefore I would like to conclude with it. Ernesto Cardenal, a Catholic priest, an internationally renowned poet, and former Minister of Culture and Education of Nicaragua, knows a great deal about prayer. I have translated his poem, *Oración por Marilyn Monroe* (Cardenal & Solle, 1985) because of the important message it has to offer that I believe relates closely to the situation of American schooling:

> Prayer for Marilyn Monroe
> Lord
> accept this girl known throughout the world by the name of Marilyn Monroe
> although that was not her real name

(but You know her real name, that of the orphan raped at nine and the shop-worker who at sixteen tried to kill herself)
who now presents herself to you without makeup
without her Press Agent
without photographs and without signing autographs
alone like an astronaut facing the darkness of outer space.

When she was a child she dreamed that she was naked in a church
(according to TIME)
standing in front of a prostrate multitude,
with their heads on the floor she had to walk on tiptoe in order not to step on their heads.

You know our dreams better than the psychiatrists.
Church, house, cave, they are the security of the womb
but also something more than that…
The heads are moviegoers, that is clear (that mass of heads in the darkness beneath the gush of light).

But the temple is not the studios of 20th Century Fox.
The temple—of marble and gold—is the temple of her body
in which is the Son of Man
with whip in hand
throws out the merchants of 20th Century Fox
who made your house of prayer into a den of thieves.

Lord,
in this world contaminated with radioactivity and sin
you would not blame a shop-worker.
Who like any other shop-worker dreamed of being a movie star.
And her dream was reality (but a Technicolor reality).
All she did was follow the *script* we gave her.
—that of our own lives—
And it was an absurd script.

Forgive her Lord and forgive us all for our 20th Century
For our Colossal Super-Production which we have all helped to create.
She was hungry for love and we gave her tranquilizers.
For our sadness of not being saints she was recommended psychoanalysis.
Remember Lord her growing dread of the camera and her hatred of makeup—yet insisting on fresh makeup for every scene—and how her horror grew as did her unpunctuality at the studios.

Like any other shop-girl she dreamed of being a movie star.
And her life was as unreal as a dream a psychiatrist interprets and files.

Her romances were a kiss with closed eyes
When her eyes open she discovers that it happened beneath spotlights
And the lights go off and the two walls of the room are taken down (it was a movie set)
while the director walks away with notebook in hand because the scene has been shot.
Or like a cruise on a yacht, a kiss in Singapore, a dance in Rio, a reception in the mansion of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor,
watched from a tiny room of a miserable apartment.

The movie ended with out the final kiss.
They found her dead in her bed with her hand on the telephone.
And the detectives did not know whom she was going to call.
It was as if someone had dialed the number of the only friendly voice just to hear the voice of a recording saying: Wrong Number.
Or like someone who has been wounded by gangsters reaches a hand to a disconnected phone.

Lord
Whoever it may have been that she was going to call (and maybe it wasn't anyone or it was Someone whose number is not listed in the phonebook of Los Angeles)
Lord, You pick up the phone!

Cardenal communicated the intense loneliness of Marilyn Monroe, who dreamed of being a star, of being loved, but found this absurd script meaningless. When the lights turned on and the scene was shot, it was over. In the end she was used as a commodity in a society that worships consumerism. We all share responsibility for the destruction and eventual demise of this tragic figure, for we are all participants in "our 20th Century." We are the thieves who defile the temple of marble and gold.

Of course this poem is about more than the life and death of Marilyn Monroe. I think it relates to schooling. Public schools in the United States were created on the supposed notion that everyone in a democratic society has an equal right to opportunity through education. Public schooling houses the dream that education is a path for social mobility. Schools represent safety, nurturing, inquiry, and hope. School could be the temple that Cardenal wrote of, and thieves who worship false idols of standardized testing and individual meritocracy have overrun it. The possibility of equitable education for U.S. schoolchildren may look bleak, but there is hope. First, we must recognize our involvement in the oppressive social structures that create unequal conditions, including schooling, for many people. Then, we need to form bonds and continue to struggle for equity in education and for a more just society. Great curricula may not have the power to overhaul society, but because school represents our hopes and our dreams as a people, we are obligated to strive for curriculum that not only advocates social justice but also embodies it.

Appendix

Movies Used in the Study

De Luca, M. (Producer), & Ross, G. (Writer/Director). (1995). *Pleasantville* [Motion picture]. United States: New Line Cinema

Educational Video Center (Producer). (2001). *Youth vs. media* [Motion picture]. (Available from Educational Video Center, 120 W. 30th Street, 7th Fl., New York, NY 10001)

Hughes, J. (Producer/Director/Writer). (1985). *The Breakfast Club* [Motion picture]. United States: Universal Studios

Kent, E. G. (Producer/Director). (2002). *Middle school confessions* [Motion picture]. (Available from HBO Home Video, 1100 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036)

The Llano Grande Center (Producer). (2001). *Edcouch—Elsa* [Motion picture]. (Available from Llano Grande Center for Research and Development, P.O. Box 340, Edcouch, TX 78538)

Musca, T. (Producer), & Menéndez, R. (Director). (1988). *Stand and deliver* [Motion picture]. United States: Warner Brothers Studios

Simpson, D., & Bruckheimer, J. (Producers), & Smith, J. N. (Director). (1995). *Dangerous minds* [Motion picture]. United States: Holywood Pictures

The Teachers' Studio of Sunbridge (Producer). (1999). *Urban Waldorf: A day in the life of a Milwaukee public school* [Motion picture]. (Available from Cicala Filmworks, Inc. 115 West 29th Street, Suite 101, New York, NY 10001)

References

Anyon, J. (1997). *Ghetto schooling: A political economy of urban educational reform.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Apple, M. (1979). *Ideology and curriculum.* London, England: Routledge.

Ayers, W. (1993). *To teach: The journey of a teacher.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Banks, M. (1995). Visual research methods. *Social Research Update, 11.*

Banks, J., & Banks, C. (Eds.). (1995). *Handbook of research on multicultural education*. New York: Macmillan.

Beane, J., & Apple, M. (1995). The case for democratic schools. In J. Beane & M. Apple (Eds.), *Democratic schools* (pp. 1-26). Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Bertram, C. (2000). Fitful narratives: The textual consequences of abuse. In L. Weis & M. Fine (Eds.), *Speed bumps: A student-friendly guide to qualitative research* (pp 108-110). New York: Teachers College Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinctions: The social critique of the judgment of taste.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bowles, S., & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in capitalist America: Educational reform and the contradictions of economic life.* New York: Basic Books.

Bredekamp, S., & Copple, S. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Cardenal, E., & Solle, D. (1985). *Oración por Marilyn Monroe.* Managua, Nicaragua: Editorial Nueva Nicaragua—Ediciones Monimbó.

Cary, L. (1999). Unexpected stories: Life history and the limits of representation. *Qualitative Inquiry, 5*(3), 411-427.

Clifford, J., & Marcus, G. E. (Eds.). (1986). *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnography.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Corbett, D., & Wilson, B. (1995). Make a difference with, not for, students: A plea to researchers and reformers. *Educational Researcher, 24*(5), 12-17.

Counts, G. (1932). *Dare the schools build a new social order?* New York: John Day.

Cummins, J. (2001). HER Classic: Empowering minority students: A framework for intervention. *Harvard Educational Review, 71*(4), 649-675. (Originally published 1986)

Delpit, L. (1988). The silenced dialogue: Power and pedagogy in educating other people's children. *Harvard Educational Review, 58*, 280-298.

Delpit, L. (1995). *Other people's children: Cultural conflict in the classroom.* New York: The New Press.

Dewey, J. (1916). *Democracy and education.* New York: Macmillan.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Macmillan.

Duckworth, E. (Ed.). (1987). *"Tell me more": Listening to learners explain.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review, 59,* 297-324.

Ellsworth, E. (1990). Educational films against critical pedagogy. In E. Ellsworth & M. H. Whatley (Eds.), *The ideology of mages in educational media: Hidden curriculums in the classroom* (pp. 10-26). New York: Teachers College Press.

Emerson, R., Fretz, R., & Shaw, L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes.* Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press.

Emihovich, C. (1995). Distancing passion: Narratives in social science. *International Journal of Qualitative Research in Education, 8*(1), 37-48.

Ewald, W. (1985). *Portraits and dreams.* New York: Aperture.

Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 70-82). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fine, M., & Weis, L. (1996). Writing the "wrongs" of fieldwork: Confronting our own research/writing dilemmas in urban ethnographies. *Qualitative Inquiry, 2*, 251-274.

Foley, D. (1995). *The heartland chronicles.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Foley, D. (2002). Critical ethnography: The reflexive turn. *International Journal of Qualitative Research in Education, 15*(5), 469-490.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. (1986). Black student's school success: Coping with the burden of "acting White." *Urban Review, 18,* 176-206.

Franken, A. (2003). *Lies and the lying liars who tell them.* New York: Penguin Books

Frankenberg, R. (1993). *The social construction of Whiteness: White women, race matters.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Seabury Press.

Fried, R. (1995). *The passionate teacher: A practical guide.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Gainer, J. (1989). [Interview with Pio Celestino: Director who doesn't direct]. Unpublished raw data.

Giroux, H. (1983). Theories of reproduction and resistance in the new sociology of education: A critical analysis. *Harvard Educational Review, 53*(3), 261-293.

Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* New York: Longman.

Goldstein, L. S. (2000). Ethical dilemmas in designing collaborative research: Lessons learned the hard way. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 13*(13), 517-530.

Goodman, S. (2003). *Teaching youth media: A critical guide to literacy, video production, and social change.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Graue, M. E., & Walsh, D. J. (1998). *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Greene, M (1988). *The dialectic of freedom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Guajardo, M. A., & Guajardo, F. J. (2002). Critical ethnography and community change. In Y. Zou & E.T. Trueba (Eds.), *Ethnography and schools: Qualitative approaches to the study of education* (pp. 281-304). Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield.

Haberman, M. (1991). The pedagogy of poverty versus good teaching. *Phi Delta Kappan, 73*, 290-294.

Harper, D. (1998). An argument for visual sociology. In J. Prosser (Ed), *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers* (pp. 24-41). New York: Routledge Falmer.

Hatch, J. A. (2002). *Doing qualitative research in educational settings.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Henley, P. (1998). Film-making and ethnographic research. In J. Prosser (Ed), *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers* (pp. 42-59). New York: Routledge Falmer.

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Howard, G. (1999). *We can't teach what we don't know: White teachers, multiracial schools.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in classrooms*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Jackson, P. (1986). *The practice of teaching.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Johnson, L. (2001). *Media, education, and change.* New York: Peter Lang.

Kohl, H. (1969). *The open classroom.* New York: The Free Press.

Kohl, H. (1994). "*I won't learn from you": And other thoughts on creative maladjustment.* New York: The New Press.

Kozol, J. (1991). *Savage inequalities: Children in America's schools.* New York: New Press.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal, 32*(3), 465-491.

Lather, P. (1986). Research as praxis. *Harvard Educational Review, 56*(3), 257-277.

Lather, P. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy with/in the postmodern.* New York: Routledge.

Lather, P. (1997). Creating a multilayered text: Women, AIDS, and angels. In W. G. Tierney & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Representation and the text: Re-framing the narrative voice* (pp. 233-258). New York: State University of New York Press.

Lather, P., & Smithies, C. A. (1997). *Troubling angels: Women living with HIV/AIDS.* Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Lincoln, Y. S. (1995). In search of students' voices. *Theory into Practice, 43*(2), 88-93.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. H. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lucas, T., Henze, R., & Donato, R. (1990). Promoting the success of Latino language-minority students: An exploratory study of six high schools. *Harvard Educational Review, 60,* 315-340.

Macedo, D. (2000). Introduction to the anniversary edition. In P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (pp 11-28). New York: Continuum.

Marx, S. (2003). Reflections on the state of critical White studies. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 16*(1), 3-5.

Masterman, L. (1985). *Teaching the media*. London & New York: Routledge.

McCarthy, C. (1993). Introduction: Theories of identity, theories of representation, theories of race. In C. McCarthy & W. Crichlow (Eds.), *Race, identity, and representation in education* (pp. xiii-xxix). New York: Routledge.

McDaniel, J., Necochea, J., Rios, F., Stowell, L., & Kritzer, C. (2001). The arc of equity in reinvented middle schools. In T. Dickinson (Ed.), *Reinventing the middle school* (pp. 56-75). New York: Routledge Falmer.

McIntosh, P. (1988). White privilege and male privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through the work in women's studies. In M. Andersen & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, class, and gender: An anthology* (pp. 70-81). Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women.

McIntyre, A. (1997). *Making meaning of Whiteness: Exploring racial identity with White teachers.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

McLaren, P. (1994). *Life in schools: An introduction to critical pedagogy in the foundations of education.* White Plains, NY: Longman.

McNeil, L. (2000). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing.* New York: Routledge.

McRobbie, A. (1991). *Feminism and youth culture: From "Jakie" to "Just Seventeen."* Boston: Unwin Hyman.

Mertens, D. (1998). *Research methods in education and psychology: Integrating diversity with quantitative and qualitative approaches.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Moll, L., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & Gonzalez, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect homes and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice, 31,* 132-141.

Nieto, S. (1994). Lessons from students on creating a chance to dream. *Harvard Educational Review, 64*(4), 392-426.

Nieto, S. (1999). Critical multicultural education and students' perspectives. In S. May (Ed.), *Critical multiculturalism: Rethinking multicultural and antiracist education* (pp. 191-215). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Nieto, S. (2000). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education* (3rd ed.). New York: Longman.

Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Oakes, J. (1985). *Keeping track: How schools structure inequality.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Oldfather, P. (1995). Songs "come back most to them": Students' experiences as researchers. *Theory into Practice, 43*(2), 131-137.

O'Loughlin, M. (1995). Daring the imagination: Unlocking voices of dissent and possibility in teaching. *Theory into Practice, 43*(2), 107-116.

Olsen, L. (1997). *Made in America: Immigrant students in our public schools.* New York: The New Press.

Patten, M. (2002). *Understanding research methods: An overview of the essentials* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: Pyrczak.

Paz, O. (1950). *El labarinto de la soledad.* Mexico, DF: Fondo de Cultura Economica.

Perry, P. (2002). *Shades of White: White kids and racial identities in high school.* Durham & London: Duke University Press.

Piaget, J. (1951). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood.* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Pitton, D. E. (2001). The school and the child and the child in the school. In T. Dickinson (Ed.), *Reinventing the middle school* (pp. 21-38). New York: Routledge Falmer.

Poniatowska, E. (1971). *La noche de tlatelolco.* Mexico, DF: Biblioteca Era.

Popkewitz, T. S. (1998). *Struggling for the soul: The politics of schooling and the construction of the teacher.* New York & London: Teachers College Press.

Postman, N. (1986). *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Penguin Books.

Powell, R. R. (2001). On headpieces of straw: How middle level students view their schooling. In T. Dickinson (Ed.), *Reinventing the middle school* (pp. 117-152). New York: Routledge Falmer.

Prosser, J. (Ed.). (1998). *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers.* New York: Routledge Falmer.

Prosser, J., & Schwartz, D. (1998). Photographs within the sociological research process. In J. Prosser (Ed.), *Image-based research: A sourcebook for qualitative researchers* (pp. 115-130). New York: Routledge Falmer.

Richardson, L. (1994). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 516-529). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Roman, L. G. (1993). Double exposure: The politics of feminist materialist ethnography. *Educational Theory, 43*(3), 279-308.

Scheurich, J. (1997). *Research method in the postmodern.* London: The Falmer Press.

Scheurich, J. (Ed.). (2002). *Anti-racist scholarship: An advocacy.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Scheurich, J., & Young, M. (1997). Coloring epistemologies: Are our research epistemologies racially biased? *Educational Researcher, 26*(4), 4-16.

Sheets, R. H. (2000). Advancing the field or taking center stage: The White movement in multicultural education. *Educational Researcher, 29*(9), 15-27.

Sheets, R. H. (2005). *Diversity pedagogy: Examining the role of culture in the teaching-learning process.* Boston: Pearson.

Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Sleeter, C. E. (1994). White racism. *Multicultural Education, 1*(4), 5-8.

Sleeter, C. E. (2002). Advancing White discourse: A response to Scheurich. In J. Scheurich (Ed.), *Anti-racist scholarship: An advocacy* (pp. 42-45). New York: State University of New York Press.

Sleeter, C. E., & Montecinos, C. (1999). Forging partnerships for multicultural teacher education. In S. May (Ed.), *Critical multiculturalism: Rethinking multicultural and antiracist education.* (pp 113-137). Philadelphia: Falmer Press.

Spindler, G. D., & Spindler, L. (1987). *Interpretive ethnography of education: At home and abroad.* New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Stam, R. (1985). *Reflexivity in film and literature: From Don Quixote to Jean-Luc Godard.* Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.

Steinberg, S. (1998). Romancing the curriculum with student research: Recreating Kent State. In S. Steinberg & J. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Students as researchers: Creating classrooms that matter.* London: Falmer Press.

Steinberg, S., & Kincheloe, J. (Eds.). (1998). *Students as researchers: Creating classrooms that matter.* London: Falmer Press.

Tatum, B. D. (1992). Talking about race, learning about racism: The application of racial identity developmental theory in the classroom. *Harvard Educational Review, 62*(1), 1-24.

Tatum, B. D. (1997). "*Why are all the black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" And other conversations about race.* New York: Basic Books.

Texas Education Agency. (2005). *Academic Indicator System. 2003-2004 State Profile Report.* Austin: Author. Retrieved March 11, 2005, from http://tea.state.tx.us/perfreprt/aeis/2004/state.html

Tobin, J. J., Wu, D. Y. H., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Ting, H. (1998). Getting into peer social worlds of young children. In M. E. Graue & D. J. Walsh (Eds.), *Studying children in context: Theories, methods, and ethics* (pp 146-157). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Valencia, R. R. (1997). *The evolution of deficit thinking: Educational thought and practice. The Stanford series on education and public policy*. London: Falmer Press.

Valencia, R. (Ed.). (2002). *Chicano school failure and success: Past, present and future.* London & New York: Routledge Falmer.

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Villenas, S. (1996). The colonizer/colonized Chicana ethnographer: Identity, marginalization, and co-optation in the field. *Harvard Educational Review, 66*(4), 711-731.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weis, L., & Fine, M. (Eds.). (2000). *Speed bumps: A student-friendly guide to qualitative research.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2001). Extraordinary conversations in public schools. *Qualitative Studies in Education, 14*(4), 497-523.

Weiss, R. S. (1994). *Learning from strangers: The art and method of qualitative interview studies.* New York: The Free Press.

Willis, P. (1977). *Learning to labor.* Farnborough, England: Saxon House.

Wolcott, H. (1995). *The art of fieldwork.* Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira Press.

Wood, C. (1997). *Yardsticks: Children in the classroom ages 4–14.* Greenfield, MA: The Northeast Foundation for Children.

Worth, S., & Adair, J. (1972). *Through Navajo eyes: An exploration in film communication and anthropology.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Vita

Jesse Straus Gainer was born in Washington, DC, on October 11, 1967, the son of Ruth Straus Gainer and Harold Gainer. After completing his work at Winston Churchill High School, Potomac, Maryland, in 1985, he entered Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana. He received the degree of Bachelor of Arts from Earlham College in May 1990. During the following years he was employed as a teacher at Dawson Elementary School. While teaching at Dawson, Jesse entered the Graduate School of The University of Texas where he received the degree of Masters of Arts in Language and Literacy in May 1998. In August 2000 he entered the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Texas at Austin to work on a doctoral degree.

Permanent Address: 5200 Duval Street, Austin, Texas 78751

This dissertation was typed by the author.